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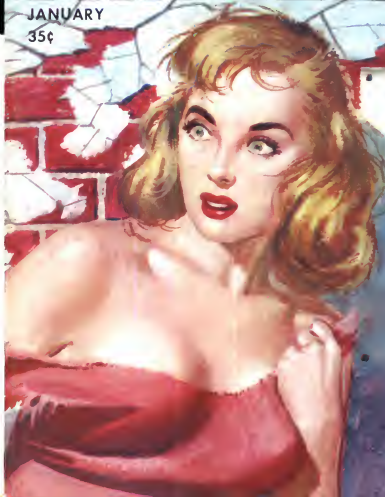
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BY THE EDITOR

• There is a rather singular reaction to the Russian projects *Sputnik* and *Muttnik* in areas adjacent to this editorial office. Every hour on the hour and sometimes oftener, swift messengers come rushing in to report the latest joke on the subject.

The first one as we recall it, went like this: "Have you heard about the new *Sputnik* Cocktail? One part vodka and three parts sour grape juice."

After *Muttnik* was launched, a cartoonist arrived bright and early with a drawing of the moon, a warning sign implanted thereon reading—*Curb Your Dog*. Also, on that day, it was reported that the Russians' third rocket would be large enough to contain a bull and three cows and that the project would be called, *The Herd Shot Round the World*.

The latest to arrive states that the first American satellite, upon the urging of various humanitarian groups, will carry aloft a fire plug for the Russian pooch's personal use.

No doubt some of the finest wits in the country are working overtime to originate even more brilliant humor relative to the general subject and our radio and television programs are slated to be filled with sparkling boffos.

This is all very fine. We certainly do not subscribe to the theory that a long face should become the fashion nor do we believe that gloom should be the order of things. The American sense of humor is famous the world over and has probably garnered us some admiration from our foreign friends.

But moments of serious retrospect should not be scorned. Let's resolve that there shall be no tombstone in our destiny upon which could be carved the epitaph—*They Died Laughing*.—PWF

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A misshapen Martian farmer could buy a beautiful Terran wife and even if she reviled him, he owned her body. Marko knew this and should have been satisfied with his bargain. But Marko had pride — Marko had heart. He could not compromise with his—

BLONDE CARGO

By ADAM CHASE

AN UNCOMFORTABLE silence as palpable as a wall sprang up between them after they had climbed into the sand sled together.

Marko sat huddled over the controls in front, a spindle-limbed figure of typical Martian build, with the slightly over-large Martian head, the pipe-stem Martian arms and legs, the enormously developed Martian chest to breathe the thin cold air of his native planet. He didn't want to look back at the Earth girl. Almost, he was afraid to. For Marko was a shy man, a 'ponics farmer who made the journey to Syrtis Station only



The dream-horror



were bad enough, but this was reality!

four times during the long Martian year to sell his crops for transshipment to overpopulated, underfed Earth.

The girl frightened him. He had explained her silence at the spaceport by the one emotion he knew so well because it was his own: shyness. But he had to admit she did not look shy. And, also, she was almost incredibly beautiful—a tall, lithe yellow-haired girl. Marko had never dreamed, when he signed up for her, that she would be so beautiful. Still, her silence could not be explained by shyness; he knew that now, he admitted it to himself.

Once he looked back over his scrawny shoulder at her, and what he saw made him shudder. She was staring at the back of his head with an intense look of uncompromising, haughty hatred. Her face was a mask of hate and Marko was at once thankful that the obsolete sand sled had been built in tandem. This way, he wouldn't have her hatred there beside him, where he could see it, for the long trip across the desert to his 'ponics farm.

With a whine, the old engine started. There was a puff of sand and the thrusting force of acceleration, then

they were speeding across the ochre sands away from Syrtis Station.

"You're going to like the farm," Marko said, proud of his English. "I know you're going to like it."

The girl did not answer him. The girl? But she had a name, now that she had arrived on Mars in the liner and he had signed all the papers. Her name was Janet. Janet Marko now, because Marko had just that one name. The Earth girl who looked at him with such hatred, for whom he had paid out a year's profits from the small 'ponics farm, was his wife and he was taking her home.

She still had not spoken when they reached the farm. Marko stopped the sled and waited while she bundled up, then threw the cockpit canopy back, climbed out and offered his thin arm to help her alight. She didn't take it, but swung down lithely from the sled without aid. Then she followed him on the run past the 'ponics tubes and tanks and through the cold and biting wind to the small pre-fab house which was Marko's home and which now, he thought with sudden tenderness, would be hers.

When Marko shut the door, Janet removed her heavy,

cheap overcoat. She was panting, and her face was red.

"It's the thin air," Marko explained shyly. "It takes a few weeks for an Earthman to get used to it. You'll be all right."

Politely, he took her coat. As he did so, his bony hand touched her shoulder. Janet Marko, the Earthgirl, his wife, recoiled as if he had struck her. And, for the first time, she spoke.

"Don't touch me," she said coldly. It was a beautiful voice she had, but the words were wrong, all wrong. "You bought me, and I'm your property, I guess, unless you want to let me go of your own free will. Those are the laws, Marko. But don't expect me to let you touch me."

"But I—you're my wife!" Marko cried in a shocked voice.

She shrugged haughtily. "Anything you get from me, you'll have to take by force. Anything, Marko. If you try to touch me, I'll fight you. You're a Martian, and you're scrawny. I'm probably as strong as you are. I may be stronger. Are you going to make me find out?"

She did not speak in heat. She was quite calm, icily calm and hating.

"No, I—"

"And if you should be the stronger," she went on implacably, "then you'd better learn not to turn your back. If you try to take anything by strength, and if you turn your back, I'll kill you. I'll take a knife to you. I'll do anything I have to."

"Then why did you come here?" Marko asked, still shocked, the disappointment welling up in him like sudden grief. "Why did you come to Mars?"

"Why?" Janet laughed. It was not a pretty sound. "Because there are too many mouths to feed on Earth. Because it was the only way to get to the outworlds—for a girl with no money."

There was more, of course, but she didn't finish it. If Marko voluntarily let her go, she was free, and on Mars, and would keep her portion of the bride price. It was the law.

"All I wanted was for you to be happy, to like it here," Marko said in despair. "I worked so hard to fix the house up for you. I'm a lonely man. I—come, look at the kitchen! It is a kitchen for a woman, you'll see. Come!"

In his enthusiasm, he touched her shoulder again. Her face didn't change, but

she swung on him without warning, balling her fist and hitting him hard in the face. Blood spurted from Marko's nose and he staggered back. Involuntary tears sprang to his eyes, and he averted his face, staring numbly at the wall, aware of the salty taste of blood in his mouth and the shattered dreams which had come collapsing down all about him.

"Well?" Janet demanded. "Have you had enough?"

"I wouldn't touch you in anger," Marko protested. "I'd never try to hurt you. Never, don't you understand? I didn't send for you to do that." He cried brokenly, "It was a wife I wanted, a wife I sent for. My wife . . ."

For a brief instant, surprise fought the cold hatred in Janet's voice. "Then you won't . . . I mean, you won't try and . . ."

It was as if her sudden surprise was a wedge in the wall which Marko could breach. He stepped around her to the door, careful not to touch her, and opened it. The wind howled.

"You are no wife!" he cried. "You didn't come here to be a wife! You cheated me. Get out! Get out of my house. I don't want you here. I don't want you in my house."

Janet just stood there.

"Go on, I don't want you here. Take the sand sled. It's yours. I give it to you." He sobbed brokenly, "With my best wishes. Now go . . ."

Janet went through the doorway and out into the wind. Marko took her worn overcoat off the wall peg and threw it after her. It caught in the wind and billowed, then fell to the sand. Marko ran outside, picked it up and dropped it like a cloak over her shoulders. When his hands touched her this time, she didn't say anything.

Marko was all choked up. He couldn't speak. He pointed to the sand sled and, the cloak flying out behind her, she ran to it. She clamped the glassite canopy down with a bang, there was a puff and a spurt of sand, and the sled whined away.

Marko went back into the house. He walked into the kitchen, his thin shoulders slumped, just as if he was taking Janet through it, showing it to her.

"This is the range," he said aloud. "Electric. We have our own generator. Over here, my wife, is the food freezer. I'll bet," he added with a sad smile, "there isn't another 'ponics farm in the whole of

Syrtis with a food freezer this size. And here, here is the . . ."

He went on, giving the tour to a woman who was no longer there, a woman who had only existed, as he had envisioned her, in his dreams.

Afterwards, he returned to the small living room and sat down, his elbows on his knees, his head hanging.

She was no wife, Marko thought. She had never meant to be a wife. It was a trick, a trick she had played on him to earn her passage to Mars. Well, she had earned it, and he was alone again.

He buckled on his heavy cold-weather outer garment and made his way outside to the vats. He spent two hours among them, doing mostly unnecessary things, for he had worked hard the past week so that he could give all his attention, at least for the first few days, to his wife.

But he couldn't concentrate on his work now. All he saw was her face. In the vats, in the sand, in the pale blue sky. Her face—not as he had seen it, but as he imagined it could be. The same beautiful face, so unexpectedly beautiful, but smiling now, smiling as he imagined she could smile, a small, secret, loving smile, especially for him.

Where would she go? he thought. There were the auctions, of course. Since she had left him and he willingly had let her go, she was now free to put herself up for auction with one of the big companies in Syrtis Station. She would have to do that, he realized, since there was no employment for her, an outworlder, anywhere on Mars. But he knew about the auctions, and she didn't. He shuddered. She could be bought not as a wife but as a slave. She could be purchased outright, as chattel. And there were tales in circulation of what happened to such girls in the dives on the narrow streets surrounding the spaceport in Syrtis Station.

I should hate her, he thought. How can I do anything but hate her? But he knew at once he did not hate her, knew, in fact, that his own unexpected gentleness had probably made it possible for her to carry out the plan which she had formulated, perhaps only tentatively, on the long journey from Earth. Reasoning thus circuitously, he convinced himself in a comparatively short time that he was to blame.

And he knew she might get into trouble. Into desperate trouble. After what had hap-

pened, there could be no thought of bringing her back as his wife, but—possibly—she might need help.

Marko went to the machine shed, opened the double doors against the howling wind, and climbed aboard the ancient tractor he used for surface farming near the well during the brief summer season of the Martian Syrtis. It would take him hours to reach Syrtis Station on the tractor, he thought, long hours in which anything might happen. Anything.

With a lurch and a clatter, the tractor started.

The sign surprised her. It was hung on the brick wall next to her shoulder, and it said:

AUCTION TODAY!
50 TERRAN FEMALES
SUITABLE AS
WIVES
SLAVES
SWEETHEARTS
Martian Imports, Ltd.

The rest of the fifty girls had come straight to Mars for the auction. Janet had met them on the spaceship from Earth, but hadn't become friendly with them. They were hard girls, with knowing, experienced eyes, and

one of them had once told Janet, not elaborating, that she was too incredibly naive to be true.

Janet had arrived at the very end of the auction, after the other girls had been sold one at a time to the highest bidders. Most of the crowd in the auction market had already drifted off, only a few stragglers remaining. But when Janet explained her situation to the auctioneer, an Earthman with dark eyes and the lines of dissipation etched deeply into his face, he had appraised her with an expert, professional eye, nodded earnestly, and banged his gavel.

What happened after that shocked Janet. She hadn't expected it because she hadn't thought of it, never having allowed her thoughts, on the long journey from Earth, to go beyond the unknown purchasing husband she was determined to cheat. Now the crowd drifted back slowly, and voices were raised as Janet, alone in front of the brick wall, was seen.

The dissipated-looking auctioneer sang her praises elaborately, with dry professional enthusiasm. "... and that skin," he concluded, "you have only to see ..."

His big hand tore abruptly at Janet's dress, pulling it

down from her shoulder. She shuddered and drew back—hard against the brick wall.

They shouted like animals then—Earthmen and Martians alike. They clamored for her, and the bidding was high, the competition fierce. All the auctioneer had to do was sit back and wait.

"Four hundred credits!"

"Five hundred!"

"Five-fifty!" piped an ancient Martian with the ugliest face Janet had ever seen.

"Six hundred!"

"Seven hundred!" shouted a big, burly Earthman, whose eyes told exactly what he wanted to do with Janet.

"One thousand credits," a new voice said.

There was a sudden silence as every face turned toward the newcomer. It was a woman, a half-breed probably, with the leathery Martian skin but the build of an Earthwoman of middle age. She had the flattest, most chillingly cold eyes Janet had ever seen.

"Old Hannah wants her," an Earthman complained.

"What old Hannah wants..." a Martian said, letting his voice trail off because it was unnecessary to go on.

Disgruntled, the bidders began to drift away a second

time. Old Hannah waited, wearing a leather windbreaker, her hands on her hips, her legs widespread and balanced. The auctioneer banged his gavel the customary three times. Old Hannah's price had been beyond the reach of all the others. She had meant it to be.

Five minutes later, dazed, not even knowing what she had been purchased for, Janet left the auction hall with her owner.

The dissipated-looking Earthman auctioneer, whose name was Hogan, stood for several moments alone in front of the brick wall where he had knocked down so much human chattel to the highest bidder. Then, lighting a scented cigarette, he took down the auction notice. It would be several weeks, he knew, until the next auction. He sighed. He couldn't help thinking of the strikingly beautiful but naive-looking Earthgirl who had been the last of the lot. What was her name? Janet. She had cancelled a marriage contract with a Martian farmer, as so many of them did, so often. Hogan clucked his tongue. He wondered if Janet knew what she was letting herself in for. Old Hannah, he thought, shaking his

head. No, the girl called Janet couldn't have known. It was unthinkable that, knowing, she would have gone off with Old Hannah. Though the law, of course, clearly said she had no choice.

Hogan sighed once more and went home.

The Martian's name was Onc. He was big for a Martian but small by Earth standards. He was the hall porter in one of the shabby tenement buildings which had been constructed in Syrtis Station during the first enthusiastic expansion of the ancient city as the center of Mars' space-faring activities. Now the building was run down and for Onc, who in his youth had wanted to manage a big interplanetary hotel like the Lowell on Phobus, it was a port of no return.

Onc didn't know what to make of the nervous little Martian who stood before him in the dim hallway, shuffling his feet uneasily, twisting his hat in anxious bony hands, glancing about apprehensively as if he expected the very floor to open up and swallow him.

"Yes?" Onc asked gruffly, as was his way, for the second time. "What do you want?"

"My name is Marko," the

other stammered uneasily. "I was told the auctioneer Hogan lives here."

"So?"

"I was wondering—could I see him?"

"He expecting you?"

"No, sir. But I thought—"

"What's it in reference to?"

Marko didn't answer right away. Then he said: "It is urgent—and personal."

Onc shrugged. If the Earthman Hogan had been a tenant who tipped him on Martian Freedom Day, he might have refused Marko entrance to the apartment. But Hogan was a hard-drinking, quiet, bitter man who didn't believe in gratuities, so, with another shrug, Onc told Marko the apartment number and stepped aside to let him pass toward his goal.

I never saw anyone who looked so nervous, Onc thought, then settled down with a lurid thriller about the post World War III days on Earth and in a little while forgot all about Marko.

It was Hogan's fourth potent drink, a Martian cacti brew which corroded most Earth stomachs after a few months. But Hogan had learned, almost, to live on it. With *anaq*, you could almost forget about food. And you could

certainly forget a squalid existence . . .

There was a knock at the door.

"It ain't locked," Hogan called.

The door opened slowly and a little Martian came in, his movements timid, his face almost ashen in color.

"Yeah?" Hogan said.

"I—this afternoon you—auctioned off an Earth girl with yellow hair and beautiful green eyes. Her name was Janet."

"What if I did?" Hogan asked belligerently.

Marko took a deep breath. "Who bought her?"

"Why should I tell you?" Hogan demanded in a belligerent voice.

"I just—what harm would it do if you told me?"

"I'm not supposed to give out that information."

Marko's eyes seemed suddenly to grow glassy. Hogan realized with surprise that they had filled with tears. "She is my wife," Marko admitted unhappily.

"Your wife? Oh, I get it. You're the sap she suckered into paying her way out here."

"She is my wife," Marko insisted.

"Well, I ain't telling. It's against the law."

Marko, said desperately: "I have money."

Hogan's eyes brightened. He took another drink from the *anaq* bottle without offering any to Marko. "Yeah? How much?"

"Five credits," Marko said hopefully, taking a grubby five-credit note from the pocket of his trousers. "It's all I have."

"Five?" shouted Hogan. Then he began to laugh. "Come on, you cheap grifter, scram out of here. Five credits! Beat it, you're breaking me up."

Shoulders slumped, Marko said, "But I have nowhere else to turn. My wife—"

"Get out, I said."

Marko shuffled from the room, closing the door quietly, politely. He went slowly, heart-brokenly down the stairs into the cold dark night of Syrtis Station. He felt dejected and utterly helpless.

The sign over the door said:

ESOTERIC DREAMS FOR SALE, *fifty credits per hour, Hannah Hopp, prop.*

"In there?" Janet asked uncertainly.

"In there," Old Hannah cackled. "Come on, it's late.

No reason I can't get a night's work out of you."

"What—what do I have to do?" Now that she had gone through with it, Janet felt scared. Her mouth was dry, her throat felt constricted, and her palms were damp. She thought of Marko and his farm and found herself wondering suddenly what the shy little man who had tried so hard to be her husband, to make her his wife, was doing right now.

They went inside and down a long mirror-lined corridor. The mirrors made Janet nervous.

"Reflection," Old Hannah cackled, "is conducive to the dream state. You dream, child. That's all."

"Dream?"

They went down the reflecting corridor to a large room which was completely bare except for two beds, lounges really, and a large screen on the far wall. The screen was blank and all silvery looking. It was an eyecatcher.

"Dream," Old Hannah said. "But you take certain drugs to make the dreams vivid. You won't be asleep, really, and although the dreams originate in your mind they're not of your mind. That is, they're drug-induced. Such dreams,"

she cackled, "as would curl your lovely blonde hair."

"But—dream? Why?"

"Because a man will come in here to share your dreams, to take the drug along with you and merge his dream with yours and project it on the screen you see. It's quite painless. Quite safe." Old Hannah paused, then showed broken yellow teeth. "But oh so enjoyable for the customer."

Janet didn't understand about the dreams. But ever since she'd mounted the auction block, her cold haughty strength had deserted her. She felt like a bewildered little girl in a world of giants. And Old Hannah's leer almost made her sick.

"I don't think I want to," she said.

Crack! Old Hannah's hard hand left an imprint on Janet's cheek. Janet came within an inch of striking back. She was bigger and obviously stronger than the crone. But she remembered how she had struck Marko for no reason at all, and she stood there with her head bowed.

"You'll do it," Old Hannah said. "You'll do whatever I say. I bought you. You belong to me. Do you understand that?"

Janet heard a strange,

strained voice say, "Yes. Yes, ma'am."

Old Hannah chuckled, and departed.

Janet sat down on one of the lounges to wait. Nothing happened for half an hour. Dreams, she thought. What kind of dreams? Shared dreams, the crone had said. But what did shared dreams mean?

Just then the door opened, and Old Hannah came in leading a fat, perspiring Earthman. The crone had two plastic cups in her hand. The Earthman, who seemed to know the procedure, stretched out on one of the side-by-side lounges. He did not look at Janet. He looked straight ahead, an eager expression on his face, at the blank screen.

"Drink," Hannah commanded, giving one of the cups to Janet. The other one she gave to the big Earthman, who quaffed it in one eager gulp. Janet sipped hers and found it vaguely smoky in taste, but not unpleasant.

Old Hannah went to the door, walking softly. She opened it and called: "Pleasant dreams! Ah, pleasant dreams . . ."

The door closed. Janet's head began to whirl, and strange images flashed before

her mind's eye. The Earthman sighed.

The bright silver screen began to writhe. The writhing solidified, took shape.

Janet screamed.

As he turned the corner, head tucked into his collar against the howling wind, Marko heard the footsteps. He stopped, wondering if he were being followed.

"Hey! Hey, you!" a voice hailed him.

Marko turned. It was the auctioneer, Hogan.

"Don't talk," Hogan said. "Just listen. And if you tell anybody about this, I'll wring your scrawny Martian neck. You get me?"

"About what?" Marko asked, not really caring.

"All right. All right, I'm a softie. About that girl, about that wife of yours. It was Old Hannah took her. Hannah Hopp."

Marko felt a shiver which had nothing to do with the cold, windswept night. He turned to thank Hogan, but the auctioneer was already retreating, leaving a reek of *anaq* which the wind dispersed almost at once.

Old Hannah, Marko thought numbly. Dreams for sale. Janet. Oh the Great Polar Gods, Janet!

He ran ahead desperately.

"Like it?" Old Hannah asked the big Earthman.

He nodded.

"Those new girls," Hannah said. "They're always best. They add an element of intriguing fear, don't you think? You'll come back tomorrow?"

"As long as I have a credit to my name," the Earthman vowed, and meant it.

"How's the girl?"

"Not so good. In fact," he added, "she looked kind of sick when I left her."

"It always happens at the beginning. They think the dreams are their own. They don't realize the drug is almost entirely responsible. But of course, after a few months, the dream world and the real world merge, and the drug is no longer necessary. Well, good night."

"I'll be back," vowed the Earthman.

Janet's second customer came in fifteen minutes later. He was a teen-aged Martian of a wealthy family.

"Got a new one?" he asked Old Hannah.

"Off the spaceship today."

The young Martian grinned. "That's for me."

And Old Hannah led the way.

The teen-aged boy, because he was a Martian, turned out to be much worse. Forced to spend most of their time indoors during the long Martian winter—almost as long as an Earth year, it was—the Martians knew all about dreaming. With them it was a highly developed art. The dreams served, instead of mastered, the adept. Martians were connoisseurs in this field.

The boy was very adept indeed.

Reclining in the drowsy torpor induced by the drug, Janet watched the vivid, three-dimensional images march one after another across the screen. She heard noises of contentment from the Martian boy's throat.

It wasn't that the dreams were obscene. Mere obscenity, understandably induced by the drug, she could have withstood. But the dreams bordered on the abstract, merging now with her consciousness and a moment later seeming to pluck her consciousness from her, dragging it to the screen on which the images flickered, and crept, and tumbled, and lay supine—as if, somehow, all the hidden ugly thoughts of her race and her sex could somehow be gleaned from her brain and presented on a shining silver screen for

the Martian to enjoy. She felt weak, exhausted, and utterly defeated. She couldn't do anything now. But later, when the drug wore off, when she had strength enough to stand, she would see that she did not dream again.

She thought of Marko. He seemed—now, in retrospect—ineffably gentle. It was as though she had been seeking something all her life, through the years of near-starvation on Earth, the long weeks of the spaceflight, the brief hours on Mars—and as if that something had suddenly become personified in the form of the shy 'ponics farmer of the Syrtis. She cried out his name. The dream-pattern on the screen writhed and changed. The Martian boy sighed.

No, she would not let herself dream again, not these dreams, not here in the terrible room with the screen. No matter what.

No matter what she had to do.

The third one was a Martian, twice the boy's age, with the scrawny build of his people. He reminded her of Marko—until she saw his face.

"Dream," Old Hannah said, and left them.

Janet fought the lethargy which bound her to the lounge. After the door had closed, but before the images began their mad whirl on the screen, she dragged herself to her feet and plunged at the screen, trying to drag it down.

"What are you doing, you little fool?" the Martian demanded.

They struggled together. "... I paid for this ... these dreams ..." panted the Martian.

The screen fell.

Behind it was a window, and a long drop through the dark of the night to an unseen alley below.

They struggled together, at the window.

"I don't know anyone named Janet," Old Hannah told Marko.

"But he said—"

"Who said?" Hannah demanded craftily.

Marko could not reveal the man's name. "I know she's here," he repeated stubbornly.

"If you don't get out, I'll have you thrown out," Hannah warned him.

He said suddenly, realizing even as he spoke that he could not be convincing, that his threadbare clothing and his naive, tired face put the lie to his words, "Very well, I want

a dream. I want a new girl. Brand new. I will pay."

He knew now that he should have come in with that story. Then maybe . . . maybe . . .

All Old Hannah did was laugh.

Just then Marko heard a girl scream. He was up and running before Old Hannah could stop him. Up two flights of stairs and down a long hall with the crone flying after him.

"Janet!" he cried.

He heard her call his name. He burst through a door, into a large room.

The screen had fallen to the floor. The two figures, dim because the screen, now off, had supplied most of the light, struggled together near the window. All he could see of her was her yellow hair.

He flung himself across the room. The struggling figures came apart, then there was the sudden shattering sound of breaking glass.

"Marko," she said. It was like a prayer, for what might have been, on her lips.

Then she fell through the window.

Blindly, not thinking, beyond rational thought, Marko threw himself at the other Martian. He knocked the man down with one blow, almost surprised that he could do it.

The man got up. Marko knocked him down again. The man climbed unsteadily to his knees.

Finally—Marko did not know who had called them—the police came. They dragged him off the inert man and tried to hold him, but they could not. He went to the window and peered out. A bitter, cold wind whipped at his face.

At the bottom, in the alley, he could see her yellow hair framing her still head.

The life of the hospital moved about him. Hurrying nurses in crisp white uniforms, moving purposefully down the corridors. Doctors on silent feet. Hurrying. Hurrying. A vague smell of antiseptic. Others, like Marko, waiting grimly, uncertainly, nervously, anxiously, in despair.

"Mr. Marko," a voice called.

The nurse was an Earth girl with red hair. Marko was always surprised about the abundance of hair colors possible for Earth people. All Martian hair was dead white.

"I'm Marko."

"Your wife—"

So far they had told him nothing. Just to wait. The hours had trickled by, like sand in an hourglass marking the final few hours of his life.

For, if she died, then his life was over . . .

"She—is she dead?" He could say the word. Dead. He expected an affirmative answer. Now, after seeing her yellow hair spread out fanlike about her head in the alley, the word had lost all meaning.

"She's had a bad fall," the nurse said. "Both her arms are broken. And one leg. She suffered a concussion of the brain."

"She's alive!" Marko gasped.

"She's alive. She wants to see you."

They went upstairs together.

The doctor was an elderly Martian with a kind face and smudges of overwork under his eyes. "Just a few moments," he said. He looked at Marko. "Be gentle."

The room was dark and absolutely silent. He saw the bed dimly, the huddled mound on it.

"Janet?"

She didn't answer him.

He went over to the bed. He reached out, then withdrew his hand. He couldn't touch her, now or ever, unless she said it was all right.

"Marko."

He stood there, stiffly.

"Marko, put your hand on my head. It's so warm."

Trembling from head to toe, he reached out and placed his hand on her brow.

"You came after me," she said. "After what I did. After how I acted."

"Don't try to talk, rest."

"Touch me again like that. I want to hold you. I want to never let you go. But I can't. My arms . . ."

He leaned over the bed and gently kissed her dry, hot brow, just touching his lips to it. Her shoulders moved. That was all.

"I never even gave you a chance," she said, crying.

"It was my fault. I rushed you too much."

"Rushed me? If . . . if I didn't have you now, if I had lost you . . ."

"Shh! You don't know what you're saying," he told her with a tired smile. "I don't expect your feeling for me to change. It doesn't matter. I'll care for you."

"You'll show me your farm. Everything. 'Ponics vats and all. I think—I know I'm going to love it."

He started to tell her about the kitchen.

She was weeping happily, a smile lighting up her whole face and tears streaming down her cheeks, when the doctor led him away.

THE END

Rondell lied and cheated; he murdered and pillaged; he looked upon rape and carnage with the same unconcern with which he regarded suffering and want. This made him a completely normal person, because all Earth had become a—

SCHOOL FOR ASSASSINS

By ELLIS HART

RONDELL awoke all at once. Not in soggy sections after a sound sleep, but with a rigid awakeness, product of cold nightmares and the expectation of a footstep. The instant of awake brought an acute awareness of them outside the window.

Even before the metallic voice from the police copter shattered the early morning silence, he knew they were out there. Waiting for what? Or just waiting.

Then: "All right, Rondell. No fight please! There are police officers out here who have children, there are others in this building . . . think of them. Don't make us blast! Come out slowly, with your hands clasped behind your neck or on top of your head." The cop was unsure of his words, and he fumbled the hand-position directions; Rondell grimaced. It had been a long, long time since these civilian cops had been pressed

into service, since they had actually cornered a dangerous man who might give them trouble. All their drilling and pamphlets and fake hero-pride could not help them now, and they were scared. The frightened-animal tingle to the voice had told him all he wanted to know. Even alone—and how long he had been alone!—he was more than a match for them. Still . . . he should not feel over-confident. *That* might be a little bit dangerous.

The silly way they thought of their safe little homes, their children, their petty lives. He grinned hugely at them. Then, before he could stop it, a feeling of utter aloneness washed him.

He abruptly felt defeated, lost. Where was the end to all this? And was *this* to be his eventual end? Somebody not getting the jump on them when they found him? Dead from a police disruptor in a



With deadly efficiency, they moved on Rondell
from above and below.

cheap hotel, with the cloak of an unsuccessful thief smothering him in his last moments? In the same instant he tightened mentally. Not here. Not this way. Perhaps soon, but at least in his own time, on his own terms.

Another blast of the public address megaphone clattered about the room as he stepped quickly to the closet, taking from a hook there the fly-belt and propulsor unit. Without wasted movements he strapped the units to his back and waist. Outside the door to his room he could hear the furtive, frightened steps of the civilian police, setting up riot disruptors in the hall, ready to spray the room through the door if he made it necessary.

He chuckled softly. They were bluffing and he knew it, but just *one* might tick the firing stud.

So I'll try not to make it necessary, he thought briskly, edging toward the window. He flattened himself against the wall, wishing he had not turned the windopaque to "full" the night before. If he could see out, gauge the proximity of the police copter hovering there, so many floors above the plasteel sidewalks, things would be easier.

He caught a reflection of himself in the mirror-window.

The shortcut sandy hair, the squinting dark green eyes and the nose that was too short and nostril-high to be anything but animal-like. Not a good face, not a bad face, just a tired face.

He thought about the copter.

It was probably just above. He calculated rapidly in his mind. Thirty-two stories to the ground, the copter at least two floors above, reaction time of the pilot, speed of the sprayed web-nets, his own fleetness.

As an unexpected burst of the riot guns shattered the door, he bunched his muscles and threw himself through the window.

His finger tensed on the power button of the fly-belt but he did not jab. He fell rapidly, turning over, catching a glimpse of the police copter descending like a hunting falcon. The ship had paused only a few seconds, but it had been enough. Rondell looked down, forcing his eyes to remain open, despite the vertigo of his descent.

The slideway, crammed with first-shift casino-bettors reeled up beneath him. His stomach wrenched and he was uncertain whether he would be caught by the copter, die

of fright and sickness, or smash to a pulp on the plasteel.

The screech of the diving copter, fast closing down on him, caused the pedestrians to glance up; their vision was held hypnotically; their wide, white stares registered clearly in Rondell's vision. A hundred yards above the slide-strip he jabbed wildly at the button, and the breath was instantly sucked from his lungs by the wrench of a slowing descent. The police vessel was directly behind him.

He continued to fall, knowing the ship would not endanger the pedestrians by a possible crash. He was aware that they could not pull out of too steep a dive.

The police ship veered off, casting out with its spinna-rets the sticky web-netting in a final effort to capture him. But he was already out of range.

The nets shriveled into black little balls, hanging beneath the copter. Then they were sucked up into the spinna-rets again.

Rondell swooped in over the pedestrian's heads, landing lightly, with knees bent. He killed the power being fed to the propulsor unit, ripped the instrument from him bodily, and threw it down be-

tween the speeding strips—all as one movement. Knife-switch reflexes paid off, and in a few moments of tiger-fast sprinting, leaping from strip to moving strip, he was lost in the crowded mass, hurrying to the casinos.

Once again the thief had escaped.

The window had not been opaqued and Rondell gazed in silence at the oily back of the Professor's fat, wattled neck. Though he could see only the huge blank bulk of the casino owner's tight-fitting silver-mesh, the thief was certain the Professor was twining. As he always twined. He was sure the fingers of those fat, perspiring hands were twisting one over the other, like many worms struggling for freedom.

Rondell was aware of a rising tide of hatred, boiling up from somewhere deep inside himself. Climbing organ over organ till he felt its heat in his face.

The Professor turned suddenly, his face blanching sheet-white, as the thief kicked in the window with a heavy-booted foot. The casino owner's eyes started from his pale face, reminding Rondell of a fish just hooked, still flapping.

The fat man's hand darted for a row of silver-topped buttons on the desk, but the thief was even quicker. His hand, wrapped around the muzzle of a disruptor, smashed down brutally on the gambler's fingers. The fat man gave a soft, indrawn moan, a catch of the breath, and his eyes squinted shut with pain. He clutched his hand fiercely, rubbing the sausage fingers rapidly.

"Let's try to get on like compatriots, what say, lard belly," snapped Rondell, carefully noting the nostril-flare of anger at the reference to the Professor's bulk.

"I don't know where you came from, Rondell," wheezed the fat man, finding difficulty getting the words out, "but you'd better go back there. My guards are right outside that door, and they'll be in here in a moment."

Rondell sneered. "The room's soundproofed."

"You set off an alarm when you broke the window," he cocked his head at the shattered pane. He looked triumphant for a second. Then he saw the look in the thief's eyes.

"I'll let *you* phrase whatever it is you're going to say to keep them outside, Professor," Rondell replied levelly.

He spoke softly. The menace was in every syllable. The casino owner tightened his lips a bit more.

They both started at the sound of an intercom buzzer.

"If I don't answer, they'll burn open the door."

"So answer. The gun is still here, though."

Rondell looked at the Professor with silent command and he waited.

The Professor's voice was unnaturally loud and strained as he thumb-depressed the intercom stud, but over the machine it would make no difference. "It's all right, boys," the fat man said quickly. "Just a fit of temper at how much Young Countess Kinderlee owes me. Afraid I broke the window with my table lighter. Don't worry about it, we'll have it fixed tomorrow. Go on back to your cards." He was sweating freely now, runners of perspiration trailing down into the collar of his silvermesh. The sounds of retreating footsteps came clearly over the intercom.

Rondell leaned over and pulled loose the suction-tips and wires leading to the machine. He threw the piece of equipment across the room, where it landed in a corner

with a bounce and a clatter on its shatterproof case.

He stepped quickly to the door—keeping the disruptor trained quite steadily on the fat man—making sure it was triple-bolted and voice-keyed to “lock.”

A few more steps and he had pulled down an emergency blind over the broken window, opaqued it. Then he dropped carefully into a formfit chair before the Professor’s desk.

“How did they locate me, Professor?” It was simply a question, but the look of hatred on Rondell’s face told the fat man the thief had already decided from where the information had come.

“I *had* to do it, Rondell. They would’ve closed me up!” He swiped at his rolled-fat jowls with a moist hand, his voice quivering.

The thief stifled a short, nasty laugh. “So you saved your greasy fat hide and threw me to the cops. Just to keep this joint running. Now is that the way to reward one of your best pupils? It was you, after all, who taught me everything I know.” His voice dripped sarcasm, tinged with something deadlier. “Where would I be today, Professor, if it hadn’t been for you?” Bitterness seeped into his

voice, struck the fat man with nearly-physical force.

“How long do you think it’ll be,” the Professor wheezed, “before they look *here*? They must know you’d come after me. You’d better get out while you. . . .”

The words were cut off by the slash of the gun-barrel across the gambler’s face. The gunsight raked flesh, and blood welled up thickly from his cheekbone. This time he made no sound, but his eyes glazed over momentarily from the extreme pain. He sank lower into his formfit, and it squawked beneath him. The whole obesity of him quaked in fear and agony.

Rondell’s words paced out thinly. “I’m going to kill you. For twenty-eight years of running, I’m going to even it up. It took me five years to get back here from Sumatra . . . five years like an animal, and no reason for it! No reason!” Pain and a vital hatred poised in his tones. The hurt spilled out of him, and the fat man looked away, biting his lips.

It was obvious: the thief meant it all the way to his guts. He meant it more than anything . . . because he had been hurt too much.

The fat man stared up

through tears of anguish at the rock that stood before him. Rondell was a big man, over six feet; strange that he was able to lose himself so completely in a crowd. His hair was light brown; the body that poised there was wire-taut, showing muscles and nerves strung to a never-sleeping alarm system topped by a brain of cunning. The green eyes were mere slits of piercing loathing.

Rondell was the last of his breed, a breed that had died out long ago. The last killer—thief in a world where murder and pillage were utterly pointless.

And the thief stared back.

He stared at the disgusting heap of protoplasm quaking in its silvermesh and luxury; symbol of a race he despised. The fat man had no backbone. A thin webbing of hair thrown scantily across a bald, furrowed head; fat drooping in folds over the already-stained collar of the silvermesh—worth Rondell's entire wardrobe and more. But no backbone, no guts. The fat man's face was pale, crossed here and there by scars from long-forgotten fights in a youth where violence was even then becoming unknown. Small crow's-feet radiated out from the piggish eyes. Eyes,

oddly enough, not sunk in fat as they should have been. Eyes that occasionally looked even alert.

"You're going to die. How would you like to go?"

The Professor raised a hand feebly, tried to say something, but Rondell cut him off with a triumphant, "I have it. How fitting, fat man, how fitting.

"I think we'll put you away on one of your own games, Professor. I think we'll put you in the android bin. Or maybe the blackjack table? No, you never *did* like those pirhannas, so perhaps the roulette-table would be better."

The Professor's skin creamed out as he thought of the roulette tables—with their razor-sharp, double-edged scimitars—the blackjack table—with its computer-brain croupier and trapdoor seats that dropped away to the tanks below—or even best. . . .

He slid back in the seat, mute appeal on his oily face.

Rondell sat watching, not knowing *why* he was watching, nor why he had bothered to come here to even the score. It was hopeless; his whole life was hopeless. He had always been forced to come to the Professor when

he hit snags too difficult to maneuver on his own—though those had been few and far between—but this time he knew the Professor had tipped the cops off. Why?

"You . . . wouldn't . . . kill . . . me?" the words were tremulous, the fat heaved in terror; the voice was an underground piping, shot through with querulous anguish.

"Kill you? *Kill you?*" Rondell slumped back into his formfit, ripples of laughter, uncontrolled, following him. "No," he drew the word out, prolonging it, hyping it with sarcasm, "no, that's the *last* thing I'd do to you, most honorable foster-daddy. I'm going to fête you, cover you with perfumes and flowers and offer you sweetmeats, I'm going to offer you my last credit, I'm going to . . . *I'm going to laugh while you die, fat man!*

"You lousy, stinking . . ." he groped for the word, ". . . *fagin!*"

The fat man's eyes opened a fraction wider, his mouth drooled a bit of slippery froth, he mumbled, "I'd never have done it, if I'd known it would come to . . ."

"What did you say?"

"Nothing. I said nothing. Don't kill me."

Rondell knew instantly that the Professor was covering something. The fat man had started to say something, had realized he had gone too far, and had tensed inside. He seemed to draw together like the pursestrings of a fine leather pouch. He stopped shaking, as though he had found some inner strength to depend upon.

"Perhaps," the Professor added, nothing but a trace of fear left in his voice, "if we had had space travel, boy, but not now. Too late now."

"What does that mean?"

"Nothing. I mean nothing. I'm an old man, I'm too tired to *mean* things. But I don't want to die."

"You'll die."

"I know, but I don't want to die. I have to say I don't want to die. I have to say it so you'll know."

Rondell laughed harshly. "Know? Believe me, Professor, I *know* you don't want to die. But there's got to be an evening-up."

Inside himself, Rondell asked: *What did he mean by that? There was no space travel, and there never could be. Space was a stop sign for Man. Madness lay out there, so it was a palm held up flat, toward Earth. Go no further.*

There *was* no space travel; what did the fat man mean?

A slow, frightening smile slid over the killer's face. "Tell your boys to close up shop for the day."

"But I just opened. The first-shift isn't even here an hour."

"I said close. Now, close."

The Professor's eyes bulged. "C-close up the Casino. But I'll—I'll lose a fortune."

"You'll lose your life if you don't."

There was no arguing with that frightful smile, that hand on the disruptor. The Professor started to rise from behind his desk, paused as Rondell's detaining finger pointed at him.

"Use the emergency clear-out button. No personal contact."

The Professor smiled thinly. "You remember that."

"I remember a lot of things. I should. You brought me up in this sinkhole."

The Professor sank down again heavily. He hesitated a moment longer, nervously pulling at his pendulous lower lip. Rondell added, softly, "Go, ahead, *Dad*, we don't want to waste all the credits spent on that elaborate rig, do we now? *Jump!*" His voice changed in an instant from

acid sarcasm to the raw sting of command. The fat man started visibly.

He ran a hand through the air over a light-brown block set into the desktop, and a square section rose up, with a button set in one wall. He pressed the button. The thief watched with narrowed eyes. One mismovement, and the fat man would have been splattered.

The fat man kept his finger on the button a moment longer, finally sagged back in complete defeat. His hands went back to the finger-twining movements. "It's done," he breathed.

Rondell's skin itched. After twenty-eight years of calculated corruption on the part of the Professor . . . the score was going to be evened.

"Like to lay odds on how fast you'll die?" he asked.

The Professor did not answer.

It was not the kind of question to be answered.

"How long will it take?" He added, "To clear out?"

The Professor was breathing hard now. "It took less than thirty minutes, a fire scare three weeks ago."

The fat man was hunched forward, his belly indented by the curve of the desk; his eyes

never left the thief's hands. Not the face . . . simply the hands.

Rondell sat back, idly toying with the disruptor; each twirl and stroke caused the fat man to pale, and a strange flame to dance higher in the younger man's eyes.

"Why don't you just kill me and have done?"

"You mean here? Now?"

"It's soundproofed! You know that! Why are you tormenting me?"

Rondell stopped his idle movements, leaned forward and fixed the huge man with an uncompromising glare. "Because you found me in an orphanage when I was too young to do anything about it, and turned me into the most worthless thing on Earth. A thief, murderer—in an age when it is pointless!"

The fat man swallowed hard, with difficulty.

"So I'm going to get full measure, Professor. Full fathom five to pay me back for twenty-eight years. Nineteen years of your careful training. Three years of stealing jewelry I could get from the Cornucopia for less trouble. One year in preparation for the Change Chamber, before I escaped, and five years hiding in Sumatra.

"It's hot there, Professor. *Very* hot there."

"They should have the main play-rooms cleared by now," the fat man said, incongruously.

His perspiring fingers clung madly to one another, twining.

"Remorse doesn't look so well on you, Professor," Rondell snapped. "It looks belated. Twenty-eight years belated." He was making idle conversation till the casino was emptied of its first-shift patrons, but there was more, there was an urgency in his voice. As though he had to know the answers before it was too late.

"Why did you do it, Professor? Why pick *me* off an orphanage floor and louse up my life? What's the motive?"

The Professor remained silent.

A mute pleading wallowed in his eyes.

Rondell lapsed into a moody silence; he turned the answers he had found himself—unsatisfactory answers, wrong answers—over and over in his mind. Like a ribbon of flick-film the incidents of his childhood fled before his mind.

His memory before the orphanage—not the crèche, so he had obviously had a mother and father—was a blank.

He had no recollection of mother, father, home, or early days. He knew there was *something* back before the age of three, but whatever shadowy images remained, they were blown and worn away by the continual routine of the orphanage.

Then the Professor had come, had seemed to know just who he was seeking. Then the days with the Professor. There had never been another name. No first nor last—merely the Professor. The Professor, always omnipresent.

Rondell remembered the day of his twelfth birthday. He had learned many strange things from the fat man: the use of a length of black silken cord, disruptor firing with great accuracy, boxing, jiu-jitsu, deep-breathing and exercises. Many things that did not seem to make sense to the twelve year old Rondell. But on that day, something began to take form. A pattern was established.

On that day, when Rondell had been a tall boy—even for that age—when the Professor had looked at him across dwarf-grapefruit and a flowering napkin under the fat man's chin, the thing had begun in earnest.

"Good breakfast, boy?" the fat man had asked.

"Um," Rondell had managed to mouth around a chunk of grapefruit.

"Do you want to make me happy, Rondell? Would you like to do me a favor?" He had posed the questions lightly, almost airily, and the boy had smiled, the grin denting dimples in his fair cheeks. Then he had bob-headedly nodded yes.

The fat man had pulled the napkin from under his chin, settled back in his chair which slid a few inches away from the breakfast table on its rods to allow for the extra bulk, and begun twining his fingers.

He had wheezed a long breath of contemplation, gazed at the far upper corner of the gigantic dining-room (a room that said *wealth*, then said it again, never quite subsiding into silence, but offering and re-offering the evidence of it), and cleared his throat.

He clearly enunciated: "Do you know the lady we visited last night?" He had spoken with an elaborate simplicity. His tones and manner were directed with exaggerated evenness, even for a child of twelve. He spoke as though it were the most important thing he had ever said, and

he wanted the boy to miss no part of it.

"Yes, I remember," Rondell had said, without fully waiting to think whether he remembered or not.

The Professor was careful. "No, I mean do you *really* remember? Do you remember the beautiful red jewel she wore in her forehead?"

The boy had considered for a moment, then nodded quickly. His dark-green eyes were soft and sparkling. He recalled the monstrous flash of the jewel where it had glowed like a third eye in the center of his hostess' forehead.

"Well, Rondell, that was the Lady Cindy of Upper Pittsburg, and I want you to get me that jewel. I want that forehead-ruby."

It had been let out at last.

Now Rondell began to realize why he had been taught such things as walking catlike on the balls of the feet, how to dress to blend with his surroundings, how to scale a glass-smooth wall, how to use a vibro-blade and a disruptor. The Professor was a clever man, and this had been a clever plan. Step by step, taking time and caution, it had come to this, and the boy had been ready.

The Lady Cindy of Upper Pittsburg was indeed shocked

to find a hooded, completely black-garbed man of indeterminate age, curled up comfortably on the balcony outside her casement. Idly running his skin-gloved fingers down the barrel of a disruptor. Her amazement was doubled as he commanded in a youthful, shaking voice, "Open your wall vault. The lock is located in the right upper knob of your bedpost. I want your ruby. And hurry it up."

Her eyes widened, and then she realized it *must* be a joke. No one stole these days. Not for a *long* time had anyone stolen anything. Not with the government Cornucopias so available. Why, that was where *she* had gotten the ruby from originally.

She shrugged out of her radium-dyed heliotrope mink stole, letting it fall to the deep pile rug, and answered, "I have no idea how you got there, but I suggest you leave at once!" Her accent was a queer half-snort, half-haughty command.

Then her eyes drew down, and her lashes fluttered. "On the other hand . . . if you want to stop this foolishness about my ruby, you can come in, and we can have a drink and . . ."

Her eyes wandered to the deep foam-pile bed.

That was the first time Rondell glimpsed the utter decay of his world . . . without fully realizing what it meant. Her body was encased by a tight silken sheath that more set off her physical attributes than hid them. She strained against the sheath, and a fire of excitement and challenge burned in her contact lenses.

Rondell had been too young, but even so . . . something had made him ill inside. "I'm not fooling . . ." his voice was slightly unsure, unsteady; his first job, ". . . I want that ruby. *Now!*" The Lady Cindy of Pittsburg had a sudden realization: this boy was not here for her erotic pleasure at all. Her eyes widened incredulously.

"*Well!* I—I—am I to take it that this is—a—a—" she struggled with a nearly-forgotten word, "*—a robbery?*"

The boy nodded his head, and through the eye-slits she could see a confused desperation in his eyes.

"But—but *why?* You can get one just as good—though I confess, not *better*—from the Cornucopia. You *have* a CornuKey, haven't you? There's no need for you to take it from me. I get such pleasure from it. *Why?*" She

was now flinging her arms about in exaggerated bewilderment, her voice rising.

The thief seemed to be getting unnerved by her reactions. "Stop that! Stop screaming!" But she did *not*, and he leaped agilely from the window-seat, brandishing the disruptor with calm deadliness.

"The vault. The vault. Get the ruby for me or I'll kill you." There was a hardness in his youthful voice that told her she was faced by a boy not quite a boy.

She turned, and looking over her shoulder at the thief, walked slowly to the bed. Reluctantly she twisted the ornate ball atop one bedpost. The ball split in the center. It revealed a voice-control sphere. She spoke into it softly, and watched with creases lining her forehead as a portion of the wall slid up to reveal an elaborate set of bureau drawers.

It was not hiding the jewels from the world, protecting them, but merely an evidence of possession, a feeling of *I know where they are, but no one else does.*

Now the boy stepped nimbly forward, began to open the jewel drawers. Abruptly, the Lady Cindy decided some-

thing she had been pondering for several minutes. She was not going to be robbed by this child. She moved back to the voice-control sphere, quietly.

Before she could whisper the words that would lower the plasteel wall, sealing the thief into the airtight vault, Rondell turned and saw her. "Stop!" he said.

The Lady Cindy's words were half out of her mouth when the boy pressed the disruptor stud. His face, under the hood, went sick and white as he saw the result. The Lady Cindy soundlessly exploded into a million fragments . . .

. . . her body exploded—imploded — then exploded again.

The boy ripped the mask from his face, and leaned against the bedpost. He became violently ill. The Professor had never quite said what a disruptor would do. Block-targets were not blonde, statuesque women. The Professor had merely said it would stop opposition. It certainly did.

When the sickness passed, keeping his eyes from what ran on the walls, he found the ruby, slid it into his seal-pouch, and left by the window as he had come.

The Professor received the ruby with gratitude.

"Excellent, my boy. Excellent. What's that? Dead? Oh, well, I'm sure these things happen. Now, for your *next* assignment . . ."

The years of running, the years of harrying had begun.

Rondell's thoughts snapped back violently. He was in the present, and the Lady Cindy of Upper Pittsburg was many years dead. He was sitting in the Professor's office in the casino where he had spent nineteen years of his life. He was holding a disruptor on the man who had first taught him to kill. The ruby, too, was long-since gone. Poured down some invisible drain, no benefit gained from the theft, nothing bettered by killing an innocent woman. Nothing derived from it all, but that Rondell had taken the first big step in a life composed of stealing, killing, hiding.

In an era so smug with wealth and ease that thievery was not only unknown, it was unnecessary, Rondell had been systematically corrupted, changed into a thief. Rondell had known no better, and to steal seemed a thing singularly tantalizing and adventurous. He was capable of doing something no one else could do. He was a master workman at a trade everyone

else had forgotten. Until it had become second-nature. Until there came with violating the peace of his culture, a sting of life he could find nowhere else.

With the constant beating and running and hiding.

What reasons had moved the fat man—wealthy beyond most men's dreams—to do this thing? Not even the nineteen years in the Professor's home and casino had been able to show Rondell any sense to it.

But through it all, Rondell had come forth, hating the terribly overcrowded and decadent world in which he moved. Despising it, and dragging himself deeper, deeper.

"I despise you!" Rondell suddenly blurted, without preamble. He sank back into silence, and the Professor stared at the thief's face.

A gong sounded in the desk.

Rondell sat up straight. The casino was empty, the henchmen of the Professor had gone, too. The robot-sealers had examined the place, and it was empty.

"Let's go," Rondell said, motioning with the disruptor.

The Professor slid the chair back on its tracks, and got up heavily.

The air stank with death.

The casino never closed, and to facilitate the handling of patrons, pleasure-bent, everyone possessed a shift-card, designating what times they might play. For had the cards *not* been issued, the casinos would have been permanently swamped. For they were anything but mere gambling halls. The players bet against their opposite number, who was an android. If they won, the android was killed by them, in any one of a hundred different, clever ways . . . artificial blood spurted, shrieks were emitted, androids that looked real, died. The losers died also.

But then, the humans only had a three-to-one chance of winning anyhow. Behind every casino was a government agency that supported the concern. For it was one certain way of decreasing the staggering population. Let them *play* themselves to death, for with the agenol drugs, few people died of anything but violent deaths.

But give them their kicks . . . let them kill or be killed . . . and they would die gladly.

The casino was dead silent. The Professor walked before Rondell, and the cold fear in him hardened like a block of ice. If he had thought there

would be any escape, all hope was now lost. The sound of their footfalls was stark and loud in the empty casino. With the crowds gone, with the hypnolights and adverts shut off, it was a dead, hungry, waiting place. The Professor shivered; he had never seen it like this. The place never closed, it was always full.

It was closed, it was empty. He was going to die.

Over thirty years the plan; wasted.

Warning lights high up the filigreed walls cast light silver shadows along the floor. Signs of occupancy from a few minutes before still remained: crushed cigbutts littered the floor (and as they walked, the scurryers slipped from their wall-nests, began sucking up the debris), stacks of chips made crazy pillars on the tables, bits of simulated cartilage from the gaming-robots remained plastered to the betting-boards. Even as they walked into the center of the gaming-room, the last trickle of fake blood swirled down the clean-out troughs with a gurgle.

The hall was strung with multi-colored drapes that changed color constantly under the silver warning lights. The furnishings were rich

and padded. *Just like the customers*, thought Rondell wryly. He spat on the floor, and a scurryer swept up, sucked it spotless in an instant. He kicked at it viciously, then swung on the fat man, "No move. I'll forego my fun and take you out right here."

They paused before the deadly bingo game.

The Professor drew back, and Rondell grasped him tightly by his flabby, soft-middle bicep. "Eh?" Rondell suggested nastily, cocking a thumb at the table. "What do you say to a game of bingo, Professor? What do you say to that?"

The Professor paled, and Rondell nudged him sharply with the needle-nose of the disruptor. "Sit."

The Professor stepped up to the table. It was a huge circular cannister affair, over ten feet high. The sides were sealed, and a small stairway led up to the seats and the tabletop proper. The game was so arranged that if the android opponent — operated by robot-brain — won the bingo card, the chair dropped away beneath the human, sending him into the bottom eight feet of the cannister.

Filled with pirhana fish.

Rondell walked the fat man

up the steps, and strapped him into a chair without ceremony. "I think I'll even give you a fighting chance, fat man," Rondell pointed out, as he found the control box for the game.

He smashed it open with the heavy handle of a vibro-blade taken from his boot-top, and fingered several dials. The game board lit up, and the button panels went on. But the robot-brain remained inactive.

Rondell switched on the selectron, which called the numbers from random sequences, and took a seat himself. He did not strap in. "I'm going to play you, instead of an android, Professor. That way you'll have a real incentive to win." Then he switched on the robot-brain.

The Professor put up a shaking hand. "No. You must not! I—I . . ." He subsided into silence, and nodded. The game began.

Rondell punched out a code on the selector before him. A "card" of numbers appeared in the plate beneath his hand. He sat back and watched the Professor as the fat man did the same. The Professor seemed to want to say something, but he pursed his lips and was silent.

The robot-brain clicked its patterns, and ran the codes through, and then the speaker in the center of the game table spoke sharply, harshly: "I-16."

Rondell looked down. Nothing. That was not on his card. He glanced across at the Professor. The fat man also missed that one. A reflective mirror above the player's place showed what was and was not lit.

The robot-brain ran through its patterns again, clicked and spoke, "B-33."

Again, nothing. Rondell looked up. The Professor had one. Upper left hand corner. That was a start, and for the first time, Rondell suspected he might lose. But it did not matter in the slightest. For Rondell was intending to win—one way or another. If the Professor got too close, the thief would leave the game, walk around the rim, and use the disruptor. The Professor had schooled his pupil well; Rondell would take no chances, he was *of* the jungle, and he lived by the *rules* of the jungle. Strike hard and strike first.

"B-7."

Nothing lit on Rondell's board, nothing lit on the Professor's board-mirror. The fat man leaned forward against

the playing edge, and his fingers twined madly. He strained against the plasteel bonds that held him in the game. In the center of the tabletop was a clear frame of plastic, and through it, by a clever series of lights, could be seen the deadly fish, swimming, swimming, swimming below them.

"O-40."

A ding! brought Rondell's eyes to his own board. He now had a square lighted in the end-row center of his own card.

"Rondell." He looked up and the fat man was leaning forward even more. Perspiration dotted the fat man's upper lip, and his eyes were tight with fright. "You must listen to me . . ."

"B-28."

". . . you must hear me, Rondell." His hands made vague, futile movements. "You have to hear me out."

Rondell played his card. He rang a stud for lowered odds. If his number came up, he was in good shape . . . if it did not, he was one score down. Down toward the fish. But since he could not lose, it did not matter what chances he took.

He rang the odds down to 3-to-1 which was as good as a human could ring in the entire

casino. The brain clicked its patterns, chuckled to itself, said, "O-12." It was a hit. That made two out of five in a vertical stripe down the right hand side. The center one, and now this one.

"Rondell!" the fat man pleaded. "Listen to me! It's not—not just my *dying* I'm trying to prevent. You've got to hear me out!"

"O-29," but it was nothing.

"You want to know why I did it to you. You *must* want to know. You must have wondered why I turned you into a social outcast! I can tell you, only stop this game *now!*"

"I-58."

"Keep talking, Professor," Rondell snapped, trying to play the card and listen to the fat man at the same time. He wanted to know, all right. He wanted to know very much; more than anything, perhaps. But the smell of death was so strong.

"The answer, Rondell! The answer. Let me go, and I'll tell you who you must see to get the answer! There's reason to it, boy. Believe me, there's reason to it."

"I-26," and the second one of a left-to-right angle corner-to-corner stripe lit. The Professor now had three lit. One had rung while Rondell had

been distracted thinking, but the third one did not matter. It was out of the pattern entirely.

"What kind of reason?" Rondell asked tightly. "Like why you took me from the orphanage, like the tie-up with no space travel? Like why you tipped off the police I was in the city, in that hotel? Like why you've kept me running for twenty-eight years?"

"Yes, yes, all of that, and—"

"G-14."

"—and more. You can't understand. It's been thirty years and more in the coming. You've got to let me free! You've got to get off the game, Rondell, *Rondell!* Listen to—"

"G-38."

"—listen to me. Do it now."

Both their boards were lit with many squares, and now Rondell's mind was a tangled mass. He could not figure it all out. All the weight of the universe pressed down on him. Tied in with his overwhelming hatred for the fat man, and his desire for revenge. He had come half across the world to get the fat man. He had been double-crossed again; how the fat man had known he was in town, was something Rondell

did not care to worry about. But the Professor had turned the police loose, and they had made him run again. Now he wanted to stop running. Now he wanted to find out why he had been persecuted. What his past was, and why it tied in with this fat man, and what his future held.

He slipped from the chair.

It was two short steps to the brain-box, but before he got there, a final click and ding! sounded from above, and the chair where he had been seated dropped away.

He shivered at the sound of water splashing from below, and turned off the game. The Professor had been one square short of a loss . . . he had filled a line completely.

Bingo!

He went back up and held the disruptor near the fat man's nose. "Tell me."

"Go to the Slum. Find a woman named Elenessa on Broad Street. Number 6627A."

"If this is a trick, Professor, if this is something to get me captured, if this is a stall for time . . . I'll get back here. I'll get back, you know that. Inside you know I'll even it, Professor."

Then he was gone.

The Professor was still tied

to the seat, but his face had settled back into a shrewd, relieved smile. He had stalled it just long enough. Let Rondell run some more . . . just as he had forced him to run for twenty-eight years.

The running would soon come to an end.

"Now, boss?" came the voice of a casino worker, from behind the draperies.

The Professor called out, "Yes. Get me off here."

The worker came out; a thin-faced little man with a bobcut hairdo. "I got the signal on the clear-out sequence. I knew you wanted someone to wait behind and keep watch. I had *this* on him all the time," he held up an ancient projectile weapon. "Coulda' plugged him any time. Want me to get the clops on the vid?"

The Professor turned on his saviour with a fierce expression. He snarled, "No. And forget what happened tonight if you want to keep your shift-card. Got it?"

The worker nodded his head briskly. The card was important to him; without it, no kicks.

The Professor went back into the office, and passed his fingertips over a section of wall. His prints were instantly recognized, and a section

slid up, revealing a private vid. He studded out a number, left the vision off, and said succinctly:

"It will have to be tonight. Three A.M. Have the Dirt get to them. At her place, in thirty minutes."

A short sharp word acknowledged the message.

"Thirty years and more, and almost done," the Professor said to no one at all, clicking the vid off. The wall slid back down, and he fell into his seat. It rocked beneath him, and held him as he sat in misery and loneliness. His fat a bulwark against the chill that crept in softly and healthily.

In an age where wealth and opulence were commonplaces, the people had maintained the Slum for kicks. It was fake and japery from one end to the other. It made people feel good to think there were still areas of mystery and intrigue, places where people poorer than themselves lived. The set-up, so the Slum was always full, was too involved for any one man to understand, but Rondell knew one family out of every four got the "call" to go to the Slum for a one year term, every month. A constant turnover, and more kicks in a section

of phony dives and trumped-up excitement.

Through this sideshow Slum, Rondell stalked.

Quietly, softly, like a black cat in a blacker alley. He found 6627A Broad Street without difficulty. It was a walk-up next to a place laughingly called The Hang-Dog Roost. He went up quickly, having found the name he sought on a plate downstairs. The door to the apartment was no trouble . . . an old-style slide-bolt he cut with the vibroblade.

Moonlight streamed down through a high window, and he could see the squallor typical of these artificial dumps. In the bed, a woman with dark-black-almost-blue-black hair slept, lying on her arm.

He crept toward the bed, and hardly realized for a moment after the needle-nose was aimed at his head, that it was in her hand.

"Who are you?" she snapped. "Who sent you? What are you doing here?"

Her face was half-shadowed by the moonlight's angle of entrance, but even in the light he could see she was hard-featured. Not particularly good-looking at all . . . in fact rather eagle-nosed and high-browed, but her naked

body, gleaming in the dusk of the flat, was high-breasted and wire-tight. She had deep lines in her face, much like his own, and he could see a certain *simpatico* in her eyes.

He told her quickly who he was, and from where he had come, and for how long he had been running. He did not know *why* he told her, but he did. And it was good to speak of it completely. He hid nothing, and as he talked quietly, the disruptor lowered.

Then she spoke to him. Her name was Elenessa, and she, too, had been running for a long, long time. As long as he. And her circumstances had been the same. The constant harrying by the society, on all sides. And a man named Zalenkoz, who was comparable in background to the Professor.

They sat and talked, and in a while, they knew each other. Better than a thousand years together, they knew what was under the skin and in the head of each. So they were mated in mind when the rat-faced man knocked at the door.

Elenessa had thrown a wrap around herself. She sat on the edge of the bed, and when the knock came, she started violently. "Cops," she

suggested. He shrugged and pulled the disruptor from its magnogrip at his side. He motioned to her to open the door, and slipped silently behind the doorframe.

Elenessa walked quite as catlike as he did, and when she threw open the door, the rat-faced man standing there was caught so unaware, he did not have time to conceal the fact that he had been picking his nose.

A simple-minded grin flickered across his face, and his nose twitched very much as a gopher's would. "Dirt's the name," he explained. "I was sent by—"

Rondell was around the door, and the disruptor was leveled at the ridiculous little Slum dweller. "Get in here," Rondell snapped. "And I'll see if it's worthwhile letting you live."

The rat-faced little man thrust his hands into the air, rapidly, and his eyes grew large. "Hey, lissen, don't get cute wit' that t'ing. I'm onny doin' what I was paid ta do. A big fat guy and a guy with real black hair an' a beard paid me—"

Elenessa broke in startledly, "That sounds like your Professor and Zalenkoz."

Rondell motioned with the

disruptor for the man named Dirt to finish what he had been saying. "They paid me to come and fetch ya," he said shortly.

"What do you mean, 'Fetch us,'" Rondell asked.

The little man spread his hands, and then started to reach into a side pocket. "Hold it," Rondell commanded.

"Just a piece of paper, chief, that's all," Dirt said.

"Just the same, hold it." Rondell went to him, felt in the man's pocket, and came up with a slip of paper. "This it?" The little man nodded.

"That's it, Chief."

Rondell unfolded it, and across the top was printed:

*From the Desk of the
Professor
Casino Row*

The paper had an address written on it. An address far uptown in the palatial Salazzo Plaza area. "This was where you were supposed to lead us?" Rondell inquired.

"That's right, boss. I got two extra hours added on my card for the job, so ya better lemme take ya, or I'll lose that time at the tables."

"Sure," Rondell answered, understandingly.

Then they trussed Dirt up,

and prepared to find the place themselves.

For Elenessa was certain she would find the answer to the harrying, also. Somewhere uptown.

In a tower in Salazzo Plaza.

The tower was an alabaster one, rising out of the night like a white fang, deadly and silent. High up, ringing its top, a gigantic wheel of jewels sparkled against the night skyline of white and black and gold. Whoever lived here, there was no doubting his wealth.

Rondell had no trouble with the door. The vibroblade slid across the maglock and the door slid open also. Inside it was darker than the night without. Rondell unclipped a lighter from his pouch-fold, and held it up, casting its sharp, thin light around. The place was empty. In the center of the room stood a droptube, leading up to the other floors.

They slipped inside, and closed the door behind them. Rondell led the way, with Elenessa directly behind him, her step assured, the disruptor ready. They came into the center of the floor, stopped, looked around to orientate themselves. It was silence on silence.

Then they started toward the droptube . . .

Except they could not move . . .

Their feet were rooted, their bodies stoned immobile.

Lights went on. Suddenly, glaringly, alarmingly, lights flooded everything, and they were standing in the middle of a tensor-field. Beneath their feet an impregnated grid showed up through the total-conductivity floor. From the ceiling, vaulted high and gold above them, the nozzles of tensor machines protruded, and from their snouts came the faint, high buzz of the directional ion-beams.

A speaker concealed somewhere in the walls *whiffed*, as though someone were blowing into it, to make sure it was on. Then a voice came through.

"Sorry to have to trick you, but we were quite certain you would not come of your own volition. Not after the way we've treated you."

"Zalenkoz!" Elenessa screamed, straining motionlessly at the invisible bonds holding her.

"Yes, my child," he replied through the speaker, "the one man you despise."

"Let me free! Let me free! I'll kill him, I'll kill him!" she screamed, and Rondell was

forced to snap a sharp word at her. She subsided into a wary, flaring silence.

"So good-bye," Zalenkoz said briefly.

A plate slid back in the ceiling, and the convoluted shape of a weird machine rolled down on tracks, till it was aimed directly at them from above. They heard a switch being knifed down, through the speaker, and knew that wherever he was in the tower, Zalenkoz had turned the weird machine on.

A blue ray shot from the mouth of the machine, bathed them, clothed them with a strange tingling of the skin.

Rondell caught a glimpse of Elenessa from the corner of his paralyzed eyes. She was fading.

"Stop!" he screamed. "Stop! We deserve to know! Why are you killing us? I was told the answer was here! We deserve to know!"

The machine stopped, and Elenessa slowly came back to solidarity. She was terribly frightened. It showed in her face, even frozen the way it was. "You—you were getting dim, like you were disappearing," she breathed.

He nodded, and shhed her. Through the speaker, with someone's hand imperfectly

over the mike, they could hear Zalenkoz speaking to someone else. Then sounds of agreement, and Rondell heard a familiar voice.

"Rondell—"

"You!" the thief screamed, straining futilely at nothing. "Again you tricked me, again, again . . ."

Fury boiled up raw and hot in his belly. Had he been free, every inch of plasteel comprising the tower would have shattered beneath his fists as he tore them about to find the man.

"Rondell, let me speak," the Professor's voice overrode the noise. "Let me speak, Rondell, because we have only a matter of three—what is it, Zalenkoz, four minutes and a few seconds . . . thanks—four minutes. You have to go through now, or the juncture points won't be merged for another six months.

"And frankly, in your present state of mind, I'm afraid we couldn't satisfactorily hold you two for that long."

Rondell seethed, he struggled. At last, to die like this. Obviously, the Professor was getting rid of him, to remove the danger to himself. But how did Elenessa and this Zalenkoz figure in. He was abruptly confused. Immobile,

he was helpless, and for the first time in his life, though he was deprived of being able to fight back, he felt at rest. Peace, at last.

Even if it was only the peace of death.

"Now you must listen to me, you two. You must listen carefully to everything I say. I don't expect you to love us, or even completely understand our motives—certainly not feel we were justified."

What the hell was he talking about? Rondell wondered impatiently.

The Professor explained: "You've seen the world outside. Sick with its own wealth, fat with its overcrowdedness, and trapped on Earth, because spaceflight is impossible. Trapped, and rotting.

"Over thirty years ago, Zalenkoz and I found the key to a solution. The temporal-shift. Not time, precisely, but something more involved. Something like worlds within worlds, though not quite *that*, either. Picture the Earth and make it two dimensional, like a paper cut-out. Then behind it, like two leaves of a book, another Earth. And another behind that. On and on and on, endlessly, an uncountable number of Earths—in fact an uncountable number of *universes*—one after another,

each slightly different, each waiting to be discovered.

"So we worked, and we found a way to slip a person through. But what good did it do us? No one would go. There was a world choking with overpopulation, and everyone so decadent and smug, they would never risk their lives to try a new frontier.

"So we thought of kidnapping them and sending them through. We tried it twice . . . and neither time did they live out a day. These aren't easy worlds, some of them. They are Earth . . . but a *different* Earth.

"We had to build our own pioneers. We had to create the right kind of person to live in a rugged new environment. So we got you, each of you, and separately went about ruining you for this culture. It was cruel, and it was unrewarding, and don't think we didn't suffer as much as you—but in a different way. Now you're each ready. The harrying has turned out some fine stock. If you succeed, there will be others, and there may still be some hope for this rotting planet.

"Do you understand?"

They understood, and their hatred was even greater.

"You did it to us . . . to satisfy your own desire to invent! You used us as guinea pigs!" Rondell screamed.

Then the machine went on again.

He had to know one thing . . . he yelled once more, just before dematerializing, "Who are my parents? Where did I come from?"

And the Professor answered, "I—can't—tell—you."

Then they were gone.

The room was silent, and the machine stopped its ray. Then, through the speaker, hardly realizing it was still on, came the sound of a grown man crying. Then the voice of Zalenkoz, soothing the other, and Zalenkoz saying, "What is it they say? I think it was Shakespeare. 'It is a wise father who knows his own child.' What do you think, Professor . . . does the reverse apply?"

The fat man did not answer.

While on some Earth, somewhere, a man named Rondell and a woman named Elenessa found themselves in a heavy-foliaged jungle. Even as they stood watching what had happened to them, a weird saber-toothed beast leaped at them.

Twin disruptors came out, but were no good as the beast sprang past and knocked the girl to the ground. Rondell had his vibroblade drawn, and was on the beast's back in a moment.

Soon, there was quiet.

Alone, the man and woman who had run for a long, long time. Alone, with the worlds to conquer.

And they would not bother with anything as ridiculous as calling themselves Adam and Eve.

THE END

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A COWARD NAMED MAYHEM

By C. H. THAMES

Johnny Mayhem, the Man of Many Bodies had been sent into space on a brave man's mission. But how could he succeed—trapped as he was in the body of a coward? Another suspense-filled adventure in the "lives" of this fabulous cosmic trouble-shooter.

THE dying man said, "I wish you could get it over with for me."

His broken body was stretched limply on the bed. The doctor had come and gone: he had shrugged his shoulders hopelessly after administering a drug to ease the pain of multiple fractures of a dozen major bones in the dying man's body. Except for the dying man, there was now only one other person in the neat, antiseptic room. He knew the dying man's identity and the doctor had not—but although he knew also that death did not matter to the man on the bed, a frown of sympathy for the stricken man's suffering clouded his face. "I'm sorry, Mayhem," he said, "but an emergency has come up. We'll have to tell you about it before you can—" he frowned again—"be allowed to die."

The man on the bed waved a hand impatiently. "Can't

you tell me about it when I'm in my new body?"

"Well, no, I'm afraid that would be impossible." The man leaning over the bed, who was Angus-Wong, the Scotch-Chinese Galactic League First-man of Earth, added brightly: I thought you'd like to know that the rioting is over, thanks to you. The colonization of Antarctica ought to go smoothly from now on. You gave your life for that, Mayhem. The accident—"

"Forget the accident that put me here, will you?"

Angus-Wong scowled and shook his head. Even though, as a Galactic League First-man, he knew the real story behind the Johnny Mayhem legend, he still couldn't adjust to the fact which distinguished Johnny Mayhem from every other human being in the galaxy: Mayhem was indifferent to death.

Angus-Wong knew the details, of course. Every world



Men screamed and died as the lethal meteorites tore through the spacer.

which had an Earthman population and a Galactic League post, however small, had a body in cold storage, waiting for Johnny Mayhem if his services were required. But of course, no one knew precisely when Mayhem's services might be required. No one knew exactly under what circumstances the Galactic League Council, operating from the hub of the Galaxy, might summon Mayhem. And only a very few people, including those at the Hub and the Galactic League Firstmen on civilized worlds and Observers on primitive worlds, knew the precise mechanics of Mayhem's coming.

Johnny Mayhem, a bodiless sentience. Mayhem — Johnny Marlow, then—who had been chased from Earth, a pariah and a criminal, eight years ago, who had been mortally wounded on a wild planet deep within the Sagittarian Swarm, whose life had been saved—after a fashion—by the white magic of that planet. Mayhem, doomed now to possible immortality as a bodiless sentience, an *elan*, which could occupy and activate a corpse if it had been frozen properly . . . an *elan* doomed to wander eternally because it could not remain in one body for more than a

month without body and *elan* perishing. Mayhem, who had dedicated his strange, lonely life to the service of the Galactic League because a normal life and normal social relations were not possible for him. . . .

Now, his hold on the latest of a long line of resurrected bodies growing more tenuous every moment, Mayhem looked up at Angus-Wong, the Earth Firstman. Wong licked his lips nervously. Obviously he wanted to say something and didn't know how to get started. Mayhem felt impatience burning like a torch through the pain of his broken body.

"Well," Angus-Wong said at last. "It isn't . . . you see . . . as I've said, an emergency has come up, and I've been given permission by the Hub to try something which hasn't been done before. We . . . I'm afraid we couldn't guarantee the results."

Mayhem's impatience dominated every other consideration, even that of curiosity. "Well," he heard his own weak, dying voice say, "what is it?"

Angus-Wong licked his lips again. "The Starship *Oberon*," he explained abruptly, "ran into a meteor swarm on the fringe of the Centauri

System. Fortunately, there aren't any really big meteors involved. If there were, the *Oberon* would be utterly destroyed. But have you any idea what a swarm of millions of pellet-sized meteors can do to a starship trapped within the gravitational field of the swarm?"

Mayhem fought against the pain and said: "If the pellets are traveling fast enough to pierce the ship's hull and if entering the hull doesn't slow them sufficiently to run down but enough so they can't go back through the hull from the inside, they'd behave like buckshot."

"Precisely," Angus-Wong agreed. "Just like buckshot. Bouncing in a deadly rain from bulkhead to bulkhead within the *Oberon*. Naturally, after a while, any given pellet would come to a stop, but the *Oberon's* caught in the swarm's field of gravitation, so new 'buckshot' keeps entering all the time. Mayhem, I'll lay it on the line for you. There are five thousand passengers aboard the *Oberon*. Every minute we talk sees one or two of them dying, not from loss of air, for the *Oberon's* hull seals itself, but from the wild meteors bouncing around in that ship like buck-

shot in a steel helmet. If we don't do something about it, and soon, every one of the five thousand passengers will be a dead man."

The pain Mayhem's broken temporary body was suffering came and went in waves. He gritted his teeth and said: "But what can I do about it? Surely there isn't a body in cold storage waiting for me aboard the *Oberon*?"

"Hardly," Wong admitted uncomfortably. "I said it was something you never tried before, and I meant that. Mayhem, we've been in touch with the Hub on this, and the Hub has been in contact with the *Oberon* via subspace radio ever since the disaster. The first several hundred meteors penetrated a fault in the force field above the *Oberon's* engineering deck. Because they had entered a meteor swarm, every ship's officer was on duty. Everyone. Mayhem. According to radio reports received by the Hub from a Miss Wendy MacCreigh, the second purser of the *Oberon*, *every officer aboard ship was riddled and slain by the first swarm of meteors*. Everyone—with one exception."

"Then why can't he pilot the *Oberon* out of there?"

"According to Miss MacCreigh, he won't. His courage

broke in the emergency, Mayhem. He's a coward. He froze up. With five thousand lives at stake, he won't move. He won't go near the bridge of the *Oberon*, because naturally it faces the most immediate danger. Ironically, he's the only one aboard still alive with the necessary know-how to get the *Oberon* out of there." Wong shook his head grimly. "I guess you know what that means."

"Can't they send a pilot from the nearest planet in the Centauri System?"

"Five hours, Earth reckoning, Mayhem. Miss MacCreigh estimates that there won't be a person left alive in five hours. It would take the nearest pilot eight or nine hours to reach the *Oberon*. No, Mayhem: the only hope of five thousand doomed passengers is—you."

"But I don't understand. If there's no frozen body aboard the *Oberon* for me to occupy . . . and even if there were, it would take at least five hours to unfreeze . . . what could I do?"

Wong's eyes opened wider, and he whispered, "We could try to send your *elan* into a living body."

"A living body?"

"The coward's, Mayhem. Second Officer Chappell. The

only man who can save the *Oberon*—if you do the work for him."

"But—a living body! We've never tried anything like that. We couldn't predict what would happen. I'd be sharing the body with him. I might destroy his mind. My—own mind might be destroyed in the process. We might both of us go insane. We might fight for possession of the body. . . ."

"Five thousand lives, Mayhem. But of course, the decision must be made by you. I can't say anymore."

"A living body . . ." All at once Mayhem wished he could marshal the cold clear logic necessary for such a decision. But his *elan* was absorbed by the approaching death throes of the body he now inhabited, the ruined body which was approaching its demise. The one clear thought he had was: five thousand lives. He knew then what his decision would be, despite the uncertainty and grave danger.

"Miss MacCreigh," Wong was saying, "has forwarded the pattern of Second Officer Chappell's E.E.G. to the Hub. They're ready, Mayhem. They are waiting for your decision. And, I don't have to say, so are five thousand doomed

men, women and children aboard the *Oberon*."

Mayhem smiled humorously. "Don't have to dramatize it," he said in a croaking whisper. "Don't . . . I'll try it, Firstman."

Firstman Wong mopped his damp forehead and turned at once to the subspace radio in one wall of the small room. "This is Firstman Wong of Earth," he said, "calling the Hub. Firstman Wong, calling the Hub. Can you hear me?"

Subspace static crackled across fifty thousand light years, negating the enormous distance and making contact at once. A clear voice which, incredibly, might have been in the next room, replied:

"Go ahead, Wong. What's he say?"

"He'll do it. He'll do it!"

After a brief silence, the radio voice said: "The whole Galaxy had better start praying, Wong. We all need Johnny Mayhem too much for something to happen to him."

"But five thousand lives—"

"Yes, Firstman. Five thousand lives. We have a beam on Mayhem's *elan*. We have Second Officer Chappell's E.E.G. pattern. In theory we ought to be able to make the transfer. But after that, theory doesn't mean a thing. We're ready if you are."

"I'm ready."

"Then kill him."

"I—yes, sir."

With an agonized look on his face, Angus-Wong approached Mayhem. In his hand the Firstman held a deadly needle blaster. "I've never," he began, "killed . . . I mean . . . oh, darn it all, Mayhem, I've never killed a man before. I can't. It's so calculated—so cold-blooded . . ."

Mayhem's impatience welled up in a great flood. A quick death, he thought, and then the new and possibly deadly experience of a shared body. He snapped: "Get it over with, for crying out loud."

Wong's hand holding the blaster commenced shaking. Even from point-blank range he had to steady it with his other hand. He blinked, and sweat streamed from his face.

A body shared, Mayhem thought in delirious stupor, with a man who was so afraid he wouldn't lift a finger to save five thousand people. But if it worked, if Mayhem could share a living body as well as enter a frozen, dead corpse, then a whole new dimension would be added to the scope of Mayhem's usefulness. . . .

"Fire away!" he said almost jauntily.

All but in despair, First-

man Angus-Wong pulled the trigger.

White fire burst behind Mayhem's eyes and blotted out memory, impatience, hope, everything.

"Better try to drink some coffee, Jim," Wendy Mac-Creigh said. "I laced it with some brandy."

"Thanks, I don't want any."

Jim Chappell was seated before her, managing somehow to look miserable in his pale blue Universal Starship Lines uniform. With Wendy he sat in the Officer's Relief Room aft of the engine room aboard the *Oberon*. Wendy, having gone forward to the radio room and sent her latest report to the Hub, and having checked the latest available casualty report from the various deck stewards, had just sat down. Jim Chappell, Second Officer junior grade of the *Oberon*, hadn't budged for half an hour.

"Casualty figures aren't as grim as they might have been," Wendy said. "I've told the stewards to confine all the passengers to their cabins. So far we've had a hundred deaths on all decks—" her breath caught—"except for the bridge."

"Except for the bridge," Chappell echoed bleakly, hope-

lessly. "If Captain Flemming were still alive, he'd know what to do."

Clearly, Wendy said: "Captain Flemming is dead. All of them, Jim. All dead. You've got to get that through your head. You've got to. If anyone does something to save the passengers aboard, it's got to be you."

"But the bridge . . . I can't go up there."

"For now just drink your coffee."

"No. It wouldn't help."

"Drink it."

Chappell leaned forward and covered his face with his hands. His shoulders shook with desperate, silent sobs.

"Five thousand lives, Jim. Don't feel sorry for yourself, please. Jim, please."

"Sorry?" He looked up at her, his eyes moist. "Sorry! I hate myself. Wendy, Wendy, this was my career. It was going to be my life, everything. Then an emergency comes up and I—I . . ."

"Try the coffee. And try to get up. And go up there. Come, I'll hold your hand."

"Don't. Don't touch me."

He withdrew in fear, his skin actually drawing away from her. "A coward," he sobbed. "That's what. I'm a coward."

Just then an alarm bell

clanged as another subswarm of meteors pierced the *Oberon's* hull arearships.

Lithely, Wendy crossed Officer's Relief to the tri-dim model of the *Oberon* in the wall behind Jim Chappell's chair. The blue Universal uniform tightened over the smooth thrust of her thighs, and ordinarily Jim Chappell would have followed her graceful, feminine walk with admiration in his eyes. But now he just sat miserably, not even turning to see where the danger signal had lighted.

He heard Wendy's voice husky with worry but not fear: "It's A Deck First Class," she said. "Oh, God, Jim, that's the first direct hit we've had on any of the passenger levels."

Chappell groaned, for a moment forgetting his numbing fear in the face of the new peril which, for now, he did not share. And also—for the moment—Wendy's emotional strength wavered and she was just a girl seeking a man's strength.

"What are we going to do?" she asked.

The blinking light in the model went on and off over A Deck First Class. Chappell stood up and said, "We'd better get down there."

"Can you, Jim?"

He laughed bitterly. "I have some kind of psychological block for the bridge, I guess. Don't worry about me: as long as I don't go near the bridge I'll be fine."

Wendy didn't say anything. Sooner or later, she knew, Jim Chappell would have to mount the *Oberon's* bridge—or they would all be killed.

Chappell pressed the button in the starboard bulkhead of the Relief Room, and the door irised open. Wendy stepped through first into the gleaming corridor, and began walking. She heard Chappell's boots pounding along the corridor behind her. Without stopping, she dialed A Deck First Class on her wrist radio and called on the P.A. hook-up: "Attention, First Class passengers! This is Second Purser MacCreigh speaking. Please remain in your cabins until ship's officers give you further instructions. Any punctures in the hull will be sealed automatically. Under all circumstances, you are to remain in your cabins."

"Ship's officers," Chappell said bitterly after she had cut the intercom. "That means you and me, Wendy. We're the only ones left."

All that Wendy said was: "Hurry."

Matthew Pim stood above his secretary's body, staring down in surprise and awe at the dead man. Apparently a single meteoric pellet had punctured the bulkhead of Pim's stateroom on A Deck, for he'd heard the brief whine of escaping air before the self-sealer stopped it, and heard the *zinging* ricochet of the tiny meteor while instinctively he had dived for the floor, and had seen Martin, his secretary, fold slowly, dead before he hit the floor with a neat hole drilled precisely in the middle of his forehead.

Matthew Pim frowned. He had heard the woman purser's instructions within the last few minutes on ship's P.A., but he wasn't just an ordinary passenger. Not that A Deck First Class aboard the *Oberon* didn't have its share of VIPs—but still, he told himself, Matthew Pim, a skilled interplanetary corporation lawyer at forty and an alternate member of the Solar System Legislature, was someone special. He would miss Martin: Martin had been a good secretary in an age when male secretaries were increasingly scarce—but now that Martin was dead, Martin no longer mattered. As for the ship's

officers, Matthew Pim snorted in contempt. They couldn't fool him. If most of the ship's officers hadn't been killed or injured by the first swarm of meteors, surely they'd be on the various decks now directing things. Since they were not, Pim decided, it was up to the passengers to organize things for themselves. A small smile plucked at the corners of his narrow-lipped mouth. Actually, he knew, such publicity was just what the doctor ordered. He could almost hear the videocasters: *Famous Lawyer Pim averts panic and disaster aboard disabled starship*. He smiled again. Obviously what was needed was a man of his talents.

Stepping over Martin's body, he left his stateroom through the iris door and went along the wood-paneled corridor weightlessly since he eschewed the clumsy space boots favored by the crew and many of the passengers. Swimming along through air, he began to knock on doors. Heads emerged, and to each passenger Pim would say, "Stay in there if you want to, but I've had enough. I've just seen my secretary riddled to death by a wild meteor, and I say we all ought to get together in the Grand Lounge,

elect a leader, and see what's to be done. Well?"

Most of them followed him. After all, since the disaster, the crew hadn't made its presence felt at all. Were they frightened or dead as Pim had at first supposed? Either way, the passengers would have to take action themselves, before the meteors began to get them one by one.

Word spread rapidly down the wide, gleaming First Class corridors. By the time Matthew Pim reached the Grand Lounge, close to a thousand of the nearly fifteen hundred First Class passengers had gathered.

"There's Mr. Pim!" someone shouted. "I hear he's getting things organized. That's right, Pim of the Solar System Legislature."

Pim the politician, Matthew Pim thought with a wry smile. Well, a politician used every opportunity to feather his nest, and feathering your nest didn't always mean money. Prestige was often more valuable.

Gradually the crowd silenced. He recognized vaguely many of the faces he saw: some of them belonged to people more prominent than Pim himself, but all of them, stunned by the unexpected disas-

ter, had not reacted with Pim's presence of mind.

He swam through air to the center of the Grand Lounge and settled ectoplasmically near the ceiling. The effect was electric; the crowd silenced at once; virtually all of them wore space boots, and the magnetic soles kept them on their feet so that they looked up at Pim serenely at rest above them.

"Listen," he said in his booming courtroom voice, "you all know who I am, you can trust me. I say the crew of the *Oberon* hasn't done right by us. Already there have been a few dozen fatalities here in First Class, and—"

"What are we going to do?" someone cried out. It was perfect. It was almost as if Pim had planted him in the crowd.

"Well, as I see it," Pim went on, "there are several alternatives. If the ship's officers had everything under control, they'd have sent a man up to the bridge to get us out of here. Isn't that right?"

The voices assured him that everyone in the Grand Lounge agreed it was right. Pim continued: "So, either most if not all of the ship's officers were killed in the first meteor swarm, or else the *Oberon's* space-drive has been hopeless-

ly damaged. Either way, as I see it, we have no choice but to take to the lifeboats. Isn't that right?"

At this point, agreement was not universal. Leaving the comfort and apparent safety of the giant space-liner for the crowded, apparent flimsiness of the lifeboats was a big step.

"Listen," Pim urged. "If we stay here without doing anything, the meteors are going to get us sooner or later. If the *Oberon's* officers have been killed, there isn't a man on board to pilot a ship the size of this to safety, but some of us would be able to handle the lifeboats. If the bridge was badly damaged, then no one—not even the ship's officers—could get us out unless we take to the lifeboats. I say we ought to send some delegates down to the other classes, and have them assemble if they'll join us, and disembark in the lifeboats. I say—"

"Just a minute, Mr. Pim," a woman's voice cut him off. Matthew Pim stopped in mid-sentence. He saw a trim pretty girl in the sky blue of the *Oberon's* officers. Beside her was a young fellow also in uniform, a second officer junior grade. The girl, who Pim

recognized as Second Purser MacCreigh, said:

"The bridge hasn't been too badly damaged, and there's someone aboard who can pilot us out of the swarm. Beyond that, it would be suicide to take to the lifeboats. Don't you understand, only the ship itself has enough power to pull us clear of the meteor swarm's gravitational field. The lifeboats would be sucked right back in. We wouldn't stand a chance."

The crowd stirred uneasily. Pim did not know whether to believe the girl or not, but the officer beside her seemed nervous and unsure of himself, and these seemed to be the only ship's officers around. As for the lifeboats not being able to get them clear, Pim didn't believe it for a minute. Apparently the young and pretty purser was more worried about the *Oberon* than its passengers. No, Pim decided almost at once, his keen lawyer's mind working, that did not make sense. The ship was insured, wasn't it? Then could the girl be telling the truth? But Pim didn't want to believe that: his chance of playing hero would go by the boards. Injured officers, he decided, compromising with himself. Perhaps there are some officers aboard too badly

hurt to leave on the lifeboats. Then, of course, the girl would want to stay.

Pim decided to call her bluff. "That's wonderful," he said, "if what you say is true. If someone aboard can pilot us out of here."

"Second Officer Chappell can."

"This man?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, why hasn't he done it?"

Jim Chappell didn't say anything. Wendy MacCreigh said: "First we wanted to see if everything was all right down here."

"And the other officers?" Pim demanded in his best cross-examining voice.

Wendy's breath caught. "I regret to tell you they're all dead. . . ."

Pim didn't say anything. A murmur of fear rippled through the crowd.

Pim gestured at Jim Chappell. "Well, what's he waiting for now?"

Chappell wouldn't meet the lawyer's eyes. "Nothing," Wendy said slowly. "We're going up to the bridge now. Right, Jim?"

In a weak voice, Chappell agreed with her.

Pim smiled derisively. "All right," he decided. "You'll

have to show us. A delegation of us are going up to the bridge with you. If we can't get clear of the swarm aboard the *Oberon*, we're going to use the boats. Isn't that right, folks?"

The crowd agreed with him, but Wendy said: "It's forbidden for anyone but ship's officers to go on the bridge, sir."

"Under the circumstances, with all ship's officers dead but you two youngsters," Pim said, "I think the rule can be waived. Well?"

Wendy looked at him, and at the crowd. If she didn't agree at once to at least this much, she knew there would be trouble. But if she did agree, and if Jim couldn't shake loose of his paralyzing fear, trouble would be compounded on trouble. . . .

"Well?" Pim demanded again.

Wendy sighed. "Very well, sir," she said. "Pick your delegation."

Ten minutes later, Wendy, Jim Chappell, Mr. Pim and half a dozen first class passengers were assembled before the bridge door. The faces of the passengers fascinated Jim Chappell. They were such—apparently—ordinary faces. Yet so much hinged on the minds behind those

faces. And, Jim Chappell thought with unexpected objectivity, in a few moments they're all going to realize I'm a coward. Then what? Then, he guessed, their first response would be outraged contempt; outrage that the Company should have given a commission to him and contempt at his demonstration of cowardice. And then? Then, if they decided along the lines suggested by Matthew Pim, if they took to the lifeboats, they'd be committing themselves to certain death. And if they didn't? If they didn't, Jim Chappell's failure to act would commit them to just as certain death. Either way, they didn't have a chance. Either way, he thought—and I'm a coward.

"Well?" Matthew Pim demanded. "I thought this junior officer could get us out of it, Miss." Pim's reaction now was only amusement: he guessed that Wendy had been bluffing, stalling for time because every officer who could navigate the *Oberon* out of the meteor swarm was dead.

"He can," Wendy said, her deep blue eyes steady on Jim Chappell's face. "Isn't that right, Jim?"

"I've had the training," Chappell evaded, as if, some-

how, every moment was precious to him. Sooner or later they would discover the fact of his cowardice—yet he wanted to put off that moment as long as he could.

"Then what are you waiting for, young fellow?" Pim asked with amusement in his eyes.

"Nothing. Nothing at all," Chappell heard himself say. A door. The sort of iris-ing door found on any spaceship, or, for that matter, in any commercial structure built after the turn of the 22nd century. Just a door. And beyond it, the bridge. Yet somehow, without reason, without sense, he knew there was absolutely no chance he could open that door and walk through it and do what must be done on the bridge where all his fellow officers had died, the bridge which, even now, was far more exposed to deep space than any other part of the *Oberon*. There was nothing rational about this decision, but, he knew, it was irrevocable. And, if they forced him onto the bridge, he would collapse into an hysterical, useless hulk.

"Well?" Pim repeated. And, when there was no answer: "It's obvious you were bluffing, Miss. Under those circumstances, I'm sure you can

understand that the safety of five thousand passengers always comes before the whim of two junior officers. We're going to take to the lifeboats."

"And certain death," Jim Chappell said.

Pim shook his head. "I doubt it, but even if you're right, is waiting here for death any better?"

Instead of answering him, Wendy touched the button near the iris door.

Like a fly watching the spider whose web had entrapped it, Chappell stared at the door. It opened with a motion duplicating that of a camera shutter. First a barely perceptible hole, then a blur and a widening circle, then the door gone and the bridge revealed.

Wendy gave Chappell a gentle push. Her eyes were steady and mutely pleading, as if, in some obscure way, she was attempting to transfer some of her own courage to him.

Irrational fear. A whisper of unseen wings in black night. A voice speaking words without sustenance from a dim ancestral past. Blind, unreasoning damning. . . .

"No, no!" a voice screamed. "I can't go in there!"

Standing off a great distance, observing, Chappell

recognized it for his own voice.

He didn't remember much for a while after that. Hands pushed him, but of course, they couldn't change his phobia. He stumbled. He heard Wendy's voice, pleading, but she seemed far away and he couldn't make out the words. He heard other voices, in outraged tones, and finally Matthew Pim's cruel laughter. He fell down, and rough hands dragged him to his feet. He slouched miserably against a bulkhead, sobbing. . . .

Wendy had never known such embarrassment for herself. All her sympathy went out to Jim, but now she could not do a thing to help him. He was beyond help, burrowing ever deeper into the fantasy of irrational fear which had entered his life traumatically and now dominated his being. Help, Wendy sensed, could only come from inside. But before it could come—because it was needed—they would all die.

Pim spoke softly, knowing he didn't have to raise his voice now, sensing as a politician senses that now was the time to underplay his hand. "I sympathize with the junior second officer's affliction," he said, "but under the circum-

stances I'm sure you realize it is not our prime consideration." He paused, as if waiting for someone to oppose what he said, but no one did. He went on: "Our first consideration must be the safety of five thousand people. Every moment we remain aboard the *Oberon* increases the risk we take. Therefore, we're taking to the boats as soon as we can."

Wendy shook her head. "I can't allow you to do that."

"Allow?" Pim demanded, looking contemptuously now at Jim Chappell. "With the officers of the *Oberon* reduced to *that*, you speak of allowing?"

"Second Officer Chappell is in command of this ship now. If he is—disabled—I'm in command. You'll all please return to your staterooms until you receive further instructions."

All Matthew Pim did was smile. Wendy sensed crisis—and acted instinctively. Five quick steps took her out on the bridge under the gleaming astrodome, where she plucked a hand blaster from the wall and returned to the corridor with it. She reached the corridor barely in time, for Pim had decided to shut the door on her. But a closing iris-door

can be deadly, and Wendy had to dive through it or risk decapitation. She alighted on one shoulder, tumbled over, and lost her blaster in the process. When she got to her feet, panting and glaring her rage, Matthew Pim held the blaster loosely in his right hand.

"Surely," he said, smiling again, "you weren't going to threaten us with this."

"If you're bent on committing mass suicide I was going to, yes."

"Then you have demonstrated your incapability of command. Isn't that right, folks?"

Wendy lunged wildly for the blaster, but Pim evaded her easily and hands pinioned her arms from behind. Jim Chappell, in control of himself now that the bridge door was shut, sprang at Pim, and Pim went down before his onslaught. For one instant, Chappell had control of the blaster, but the six-man delegation from A Deck came to Pim's defense, quickly subdued Chappell and returned the blaster to Pim, who had barely even worked up a sweat.

"Take them," he said, "to the crew quarters, and confine them till we're ready to embark in the lifeboats."

Embark, Wendy thought bleakly, to all our deaths. Now, she realized, only a miracle could save them.

Not long after they had been confined, the beginnings of a miracle stirred in Jim Chappell's mind. The first stirrings of miracle was a simple thought: *your fear is irrational*. Thought — but alien thought. And yet, from the inside. Not *my* fear, but *your* fear—but the thought originated in his own head.

Wendy said something. He nodded, only vaguely aware of her words. All important now was what was going on inside his skull. He could sense that, without full comprehension. He seemed to be thinking—with an echo. Split personality? he wondered. Latent psychosis, triggered by his sudden irrational phobia? He shuddered — and continued thinking two streams of thought. Fear and not fear. Surrender and action. Resignation and bravado. And all at once he had a splitting headache.

... An abyss of ancestral fear....

Mayhem came up through it slowly, floating, floating. There was a mind in there somewhere, burrowing deep,

surrendering to fear, yielding... His mind?

No. And then he remembered. The shared mind, the meteor swarm, the *Oberon*...

Second Officer Chappell, the hopeless coward.

The mind, in its fresh confusion, told Mayhem what he wanted to know. There had been mutiny, the passengers had taken over, were going to embark in the lifeboats—to certain death. There was very little time left. Mayhem knew he had to act from within, hiding his identity, merging his sentience with Chappell's, if they were to have any hope. Of course, that would mean fooling the girl too. What was her name? Mayhem plumbed the depths of the shared mind and came up with a name: Wendy. He also came up with a confusion of emotions—shyness, respect, love, hopelessness.

"What do you look so cheerful about?" Wendy asked.

"Cheerful? I really wasn't aware—"

"Well, you do. And listen, Jim. I want you to know this. I—I don't blame you for what happened. You couldn't help it. You tried. You—we—"

"No. There's no excuse." Build it up from within, Mayhem thought. Let Chappell convince himself, since he did

not seem to know his mind was shared. "Cowardice is the worst form of self-centered behavior. It's my fault, all right."

"Cowardice, maybe. But this is a single phobia, brought about by a particular set of circumstances, and you could as soon blame someone for having cancer."

Chappell smiled. "All right, let's get clinical about it later. Right now we have things to do."

"But—"

"But nothing. We don't have any time to waste."

"There's the simple matter of the man guarding us you seem to be overlooking." For the first time, exasperation entered Wendy's voice.

Instead of answering her, Chappell went to the door, pressed the control and saw it iris open. A solidly built young man carrying the blaster Wendy had taken from the bridge paced back and forth nervously in the companionway.

"You're supposed to stay in there," he said, glancing about still more nervously as if someone might find him in dereliction of his duty.

Chappell took a step outside the door.

"No. Keep back. I'm warn-

ing you. Matthew Pim said I should shoot if necessary. Five thousand lives—"

Chappell leaped. Only the man's uncertainty prevented him from firing at once. By the time he did, with reluctance etched on his face, Chappell had reached him, grabbing his wrist and forcing the blaster upwards. The deadly beam sizzled against the ceiling of the companionway. Molten metal fell sluggishly, like syrup, to the floor, while Chappell struggled with their guard.

He was young, strong and determined—ordinarily more than a match for Jim Chappell, whom he outweighed by thirty pounds. But unknown to either of them, Chappell had Johnny Mayhem on his side, directing him—from within.

All the junior officer knew of this was that his limbs seemed to govern themselves, the legs moving, moving, keeping out of reach of the far bigger man, the arms tense and ready, then abruptly relaxed, then striking out, hands stiffened and palms edgewise, to feel the jarring contact of bone against bone—

And the big guard tumbled over like an axed tree.

"Why, Jim Chappell!" Wendy gasped. "You amaze

me." Then she frowned. "Did you hurt him badly?"

"No, I don't think so." Chappell took the blaster. "Come on."

Amazed but gratefully obedient, Wendy followed him. Her face relaxed.

By the time they reached A Deck, Matthew Pim had all the passengers assembled at the boat stations. Most of them, though, were milling about nervously, for, whatever the peril aboard the *Oberon*, leaving it for the frail lifeboats was a major step.

"Where did *you* come from?" Pim cried in surprise and alarm.

Chappell and Wendy had entered A Deck from the bridge staircase, and had quickly mounted above the deck to the boat platform. Chappell shouted:

"All right, listen! Don't go near the winches or the lock-chambers. That's an order! Everything will be under control in a few minutes!"

"He's bluffing," Pim roared, trying to shout him down. "He's bluffing, I tell you! He can't save us. I saw him. I saw him—he's afraid to go up on the bridge. If we stand here listening to him, we'll all be killed."

"If you take off in the life-

boats you'll all be killed," Wendy said.

But Pim ignored her. "I'm coming up there," he said grimly. "I'm going to swing the first lifeboat into the propulsion chamber. Don't try to stop me."

Wendy looked uncertainly at Jim Chappell. "We'll stop you," Chappell vowed.

"Big man," Pim mocked. "Big man with a blaster. What did you do, kill your guard with it?"

"No." This was Wendy. "He took it away from your man."

"He wouldn't talk so big without it." Pim went on climbing.

I could shoot him, Chappell thought. The thought seemed utterly alien: how could he shoot a man? But the alien thought continued: one life for five thousand . . . but no, that wouldn't do. They'd be resentful. They might make a martyr out of Pim, overpower us, and go to their deaths. There are only two of us, and one blaster.

Calmly, with the confidence born of intense bravado, Pim mounted to the boat platform. The nearly five thousand people assembled on A Deck were absolutely silent, watchful, waiting.

"Well?" Pim said. "Get out

of the way or I'll walk over you."

Very unexpectedly, daringly, Chappell tossed the blaster on the boat platform behind him. Pim gaped, and a ripple of awe passed through the crowd.

"Get him, men!" Pim shouted. "You see, it's easy if you have someone to call his bluff. I know his type. I can always spot 'em."

Boots pounded across A Deck. "Hold on," Chappell said in a clear, unfrightened voice. "All this was Pim's idea. I say he's wrong. Your lives depend on it. Let him finish what he started—by himself."

"That's fair enough," someone said.

The crowd paused, uncertain, divided.

Pim was smiling though. "You fool," he whispered. "I was a boxing champion in college."

He moved quickly after that. His hands seemed to blur into activity of their own accord. Chappell felt himself driven back, back. The ship tilted, and Chappell was sitting down, his jaw throbbing with pain. The crowd below the boat platform was shouting wildly now, as if all their pent-up fears could vanish in the beating Matthew Pim,

their champion, administered to the junior officer.

Chappell climbed to his feet and stood there swaying, the blood pounding in his ears. He saw a blurred darting double-image of Pim advancing confidently. He groaned inwardly, knowing he didn't have a chance. Athletic ability had never been his forte: in this modern day and age he had always thought it unnecessary. Even Wendy, who was as expert at judo like so many women these days, probably could have held her own with him. Now, with five thousand lives in the balance, and with Pim, an expert boxer, closing in for the kill. . . .

Then, as before, some unknown, unexpected ally within him seemed to take over. Almost without effort he caught Pim's blows on his forearms, bobbed, ducked out of the way, and struck out himself. The crowd below them went wild, and even Wendy was crying out triumphantly.

When Chappell's vision cleared, he saw that he was straddling Pim's inert, beaten form. Wendy had gone after the blaster, but he sensed it wouldn't be needed now. Panting, he said, "Let's go up to the bridge."

The crowd, finding a leader, surged obediently after Chappell and Wendy.

He stood before the irised door and saw the cold velvet-black vaults of space through the glassite dome—and death waiting out there, unseen, in the meteor swarm. Elation drained out of him suddenly, and he felt his legs trembling.

"They're waiting," Wendy whispered, urging him on. "They're watching you."

He stood there. The sweat of fear appeared on his brow, ran down his face. He was rooted to the spot. He couldn't move. . . .

I could do it, Mayhem thought, knowing that he could exercise complete control over the shared mind if he wanted to. But I'm not going to. I want Chappell to do it himself. If he doesn't, he won't be any good for space after this, and we need men like him.

So Mayhem waited, his presence in the shared mind now unfelt.

Five thousand lives, Chappell thought. Who am I? Just who do I think I am, that I could put my own personal, irrational feelings and fears ahead of five thousand lives.

But . . .

In an agony of traumatically induced fear, he took a step

out on the bridge. Black space seemed to close in on all sides, screaming silently for him to flee, to flee. He saw Wendy watching him. Only Wendy now. None of the others. Wendy—

I love you, he thought. But he couldn't reveal his love unless he could prove himself now, in this crisis. And he'd be earthbound the rest of his life too, unless he could meet and conquer the fear. . . . He smiled grimly. Earthbound? No, not earthbound. He'd be dead. They'd all be dead.

He took another step. Space was black, infinite, eternal. He squared his shoulders.

Suddenly space was beautiful with the beauty only a born spaceman knows. He went to the controls, all at once supremely confident. He touched the emergency rocket switches. It was almost a caress.

Wendy's hand was on his shoulder. He squeezed her fingers, then his hands were busy manipulating the rockets. The *Oberon* lurched, shuddered—and sped smoothly to safety.

Much later, in the officers' briefing room at the spaceport, after the congratulations, the interview with Interstellar video, the publicity,

Chappell was alone at last with Wendy.

"Listen," she said. "What I want to know is this. Once you conquered your fear, it was easy to take the ship to safety. We both know that. But how you were able to overpower our guard, and then Pim, that I'll never know. That Pim, now, he was a fighter."

"Oh," Chappell said. "It was a cinch. You just have to know how."

"Yes? Then show me."

"You mean here? Now?"

"Sure. Come on and show me."

Good-humoredly, they tussled. Wendy moved about him lithely, finding a balance, using it, applying pressure, pivoting . . .

Chappell fell heavily, and got up groaning but smiling.

"You stick to spaceflight," Wendy said. "You're terrific at it."

"I'll stick to spaceflight—and you."

Wendy dusted her hands off. "Brother," she said, "you have yourself a deal."

THE END

FOREIGN EXCHANGE BANK



"How do you like that. He wouldn't exchange our scurmglops for Earth dollars."



MY BROTHER—THE APE

By TOM GODWIN

*Disillusionment is the reward of the man who spends
a life-time searching for what doesn't exist.*

THE taxi left the airport behind and the paper lay unnoticed in his lap as his mind hurried ahead to the meeting with professors Kolarik and Davis. The final month of excavating had been so successful that he felt almost certain they would be in favor of a second expedition. Unless, of course, the crisis between East and West flamed suddenly into another world war—

A horn shrieked in warning and brakes screamed, shattering his thoughts. The taxi swerved violently to dodge a milk truck and plunged into a street that was a seething, racing, clamorous tide of vehicles. He watched them, made nervous by the way they raced fender to fender with the cab, then stooped to recover his

paper. He straightened just in time to scoot forward on the seat as the cab came to an abrupt halt at a four-way-stop intersection.

An ancient coupe was caught in the middle of the intersection, its horn bleating desperately as it tried to evade the inexorable advance of a gravel truck. He saw that cars were massed at all four points of the intersection, their horns blasting as they jockeyed for position like fevered race horses.

The cab jumped ahead as a momentary opening appeared, then jerked to a stop as a long sedan, signaling for a right turn, made a left turn in front of it. A convertible shot into the opening behind the sedan, other cars close behind it, and

the cab driver made a growling sound.

There was a screech of brakes and a bright yellow panel truck stopped beside the cab, its motor racing in readiness for the charge. White letters on its side read, CHURCH OF GOD'S PROPHET, and the horns of a public address system on top of it were bellowing a recording:

"—Your last chance to save your soul in this doomed world. God, Himself, will talk to you tonight through Prophet Simms and show you the way. Admission only three dollars."

The recording changed to a hymn as a brief opening appeared in the traffic. The sound truck and taxi lunged simultaneously for it and there was a lurch and squeal of scraped fenders as the truck shouldered the taxi aside. It roared down the street with a triumphant chorus of, *"Hallelujah! Hallelujah! . . ."* and the taxi followed, the driver snarling.

He realized he was sitting as tense as a tight-drawn wire and he forced himself to relax. The mad rush of city traffic—he had been away so long he had forgotten what it was like. Two years in Africa—

but it had been worth it. They had found fossils in the Miocene strata that were almost beyond doubt those of the long-sought missing-link between Man and his ape-like ancestors. It was a discovery comparable in importance to that of Neanderthal Man and if the war didn't prevent a second expedition he would—

He scooted forward again as the taxi stopped in obedience to a light that had abruptly changed from green to red. Pedestrians poured out onto the crosswalk, a blonde girl in the lead. A heavy man in shorts and open sandals walked close behind her, his eyes on her hips and his hairy paunch wabbling with each step of his splay-toed feet.

"—didn'tcha notice it?"

The driver was speaking to him and he raised his brows questioningly.

"Right in front of you," the driver said. "Special convenience the companay has for their customers so they won't have to miss any of their favorite programs."

"Oh, yes," he said, and saw for the first time that the glassy eye of a television screen was staring at him. Apparently television programs had vastly improved during the past two years . . .

"Good program on now—

Detective Delaney," the driver said. "Best of the five murder shows on at this hour."

"Oh?" he said, retracting his assumption and wondering what there was about dead human bodies that held such fascination for so many people.

A newsboy came around the corner, calling shrilly: "Atomic Doom Predicted—Civil Defense Alerted . . ." Two women walked past the taxi to get into their car, engrossed in the headlines of the paper one of them held. He could make out the two larger ones: WILL USE H-BOMB, RUSS THREAT, and, NEW TV STATION NEARS COMPLETION. One of the women was saying, with a worried smacking of gum, "—John told me just last night that if there's a war, it may be *years* before it's finished."

He realized, with a little shock, that she referred not to the war but to the television station.

The red light flipped to green and horns behind the taxi trumpeted in chorus the instant it did so. The taxi shot forward as a voice howled, "Wake up!" and he made an effort to resume his former train of thought.

A second expedition would

be necessary to fully prove that the fossils found represented the creature that had been the intermediate stage between Ape and the humble beginnings of civilized Man. Money would be needed but it should not be difficult for the university to finance research work so certain of success . . .

They came to another red light and as the pedestrians poured across before them the driver turned to give him a puzzled look.

"You're the funniest passenger I ever had—you still ain't turned on the TV," he said. "It works just like any set"—he reached back a long arm to turn it on—"and you dial it with that other knob."

"Thank you," he said, not caring for the distraction of a television program but not wanting to offend the driver. He picked up his neglected paper and skipped down the headlines:

East-West Bombs Ready as Tension Grows . . . Kuhnstein Kayoes Kelly . . . Rapist Eludes Police . . . Reds Hang 200 Rebels in East Berlin . . . Ten Injured as Fans Mob Rock 'n' Roll Idol . . . Los Angeles Free of Vice as Police Stamp Out Illegal Gambling . . . Deviant Society Holds Meeting—

A hideous, ear-splitting dis-

sonance blared out of the TV speaker with a full-volume suddenness that half lifted him from the seat. He dropped the paper and saw agitated movement on the screen: a young man before a microphone was writhing and jumping and jerking like a maniac while he screamed something unintelligible. A portion of the audience was visible, their eyes staring and their faces glistening with sweat as they shook and jerked in unison with him, their shrieking rising above the din:

"Go, man—go—go—go—"

He shut it off and asked in a hushed voice:

"What in the name of God was *that*?"

"That? Rock 'n' roll—biggest thing since the atomic bomb." The driver stared at him with incredulous disbelief. "You mean you never heard of *him*?"

"Him? Oh—the boy who was jerking all over. I've been in Africa for two years but—"

The light turned green and his words were lost in the roar of traffic. When they came to the next red light the driver turned to ask curiously, "Two years on just one big-game hunt?"

"No—a paleontological expedition."

"A what?"

"We were excavating fossils—petrified bones."

"Why?"

"Because—" He found himself baffled by the question. It was like asking an astronomer why he wanted to study the stars. "We found something very interesting—it appears to be the missing link in Man's chain of evolution."

"So what?"

"Why—why, if we're right, we'll have added to Man's knowledge of the universe."

The driver stared at him with odd intensity. "Most people go to Africa for something worthwhile, like big-game trophies. But to spend two years digging up petrified bones . . . I *thought* you were a queer joe when you didn't want to turn on the TV." His expression became almost pitying. "Get hep, doc. Nobody is interested in unimportant stuff like that." He shrugged his shoulders. "Who cares?"

He opened his mouth and shut it again. There was no reply he could make. *Who cares?* He had always taken it for granted that men were interested in their origin and would want the evidence of the chain of evolution completed, back to the lung-fish.

So he had spent two years in Africa digging up petrified bones instead of procuring something worthwhile, such as a stuffed rhinoceros head.

The light changed to green but he was hardly aware of the forward movement of the taxi. *Nobody is interested . . .* The world was absorbed in other things: Kuhnstein had kayoed Kelly and an H-bomb war might delay completion of a new television station; a rapist was baffling the police and God would talk to you for three dollars; Los Angeles was free of lawless vice and her homosexuals, legally incorporated since 1953, were holding a meeting; two hundred rebels dangled in East Berlin and hep-cats were trampling one another to touch their idol . . .

The world was mad.

And yet . . . Which was the more irrational: to dread an atomic war because it might interfere with watching television or to dread it because it might interfere with digging up more petrified bones?

"I said: here you are."

He saw that they were stopped and the driver was speaking for the second time. He paid the fare and went up the walk to the white cottage where Kolarik and Davis were waiting for him, all his en-

thusiasm for another expedition gone. He could see, now, that it would be utterly pointless . . .

"Good news about the second expedition," Davis said when the greetings were over. "We think it can be arranged. Unless"—he bit worriedly on his pipe stem—"war comes too soon."

"The university"—Kolarik looked at him over his horn-rimmed glasses—"hasn't sufficient funds at present but there are other sources—"

"It doesn't matter," he said wearily. "A second expedition wouldn't find what we were looking for."

They stared, open-mouthed in shocked amazement.

"We were wrong," he said. "Everything, all the work ever done in that field, has been based on an erroneous appraisal of our present degree of evolution."

"We're ten thousand years too early."

He looked skyward—sadly. "After we're through messing it up—smashing it—knocking it to hell and gone—and destroying ourselves in the process—then they can start looking for us."

"Us—?"

"Of course. We'll be the missing link."

THE END

THE FIRST INVADER

By PAUL DALLAS

If you happen to be on the scene when the ship of the first extraterrestrial lands on Earth, don't grab your gun and start firing. It may be only Joe Smith from Mars looking for the corner drug store.

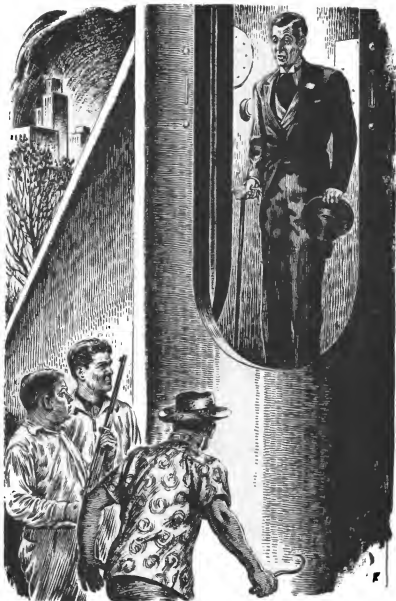
RADAR caught it first as an electrical disturbance. There was some speculation as to whether the equipment or the operator was at fault. The radarman who reported it came to regret having been so alert. Not merely his ability, but his sobriety were severely questioned. Luckily for him, before the ridicule of his companions and superiors could drive him to the drink of which he was accused, radarmen in various posts came to his rescue. They also saw it and reported it.

Something was approaching from far, far out in space. It could have been a meteorite, or a stray planetoid, but it wasn't. It was a vehicle of space, and it carried a live passenger.

Since the event was so well

reported and so accurately charted, a large crowd had assembled on Turk Hill Road before it landed and the local police, even with the help of a contingent of State Troopers, had difficulty in maintaining order. The military sent a representative and alerted certain key units—but it was thought best to treat the impending visit as a civilian and unofficial affair.

The landing itself, although interesting in many respects, was somewhat anticlimactic. The craft merely swooped in, losing speed as it neared the site. It hovered for a second and then settled neatly on the grass of Mr. Campbell's lawn. A spontaneous cheer rose from the crowd; they seemed about to surge forward, but apparently no one was anx-



"Why bless my soul! I believe you're serious!"

ious to be the first to face the visitor. For five minutes nothing happened; an expectant silence lay heavily about the area and, except for some shuffling of nervous feet and the clearing of many dry throats, the crowd was still.

Then noises were heard within the craft. A scraping and pounding; a low grumbling, interspersed with a few mild exclamations, came through the door. Finally it opened, and standing in the doorway a man who looked extremely human, though oddly garbed, stared perspiringly at the throng. He took a step backward as if to disappear again within his craft, but he stood his ground and took a deep breath.

"What," he demanded, "is the meaning of this?"

No one was prepared to answer that question. In the confusion of silence which followed, the County Supervisor, Zeke Blakton, stepped to the front and, winning a rather surprising victory over his resisting stomachs, he bowed.

"Welcome," he said. "Welcome to our friend from space."

"Don't be ridiculous," the stranger snapped. "What province is this?"

"This is the United States of America," Supervisor Blakton answered proudly. "You see, sir, we don't have provinces here, exactly. There are states, counties, cities . . . but we don't call them provinces. I, myself, sir, am the Supervisor of the County of . . ."

"Will you stop this foolishness?" the visitor interrupted impatiently. "You know perfectly well that you are all under the Authority of Kastrat and this play-acting is contrary to the public good. Now be kind enough to explain this nonsense at once."

The sergeant in charge of the State Trooper detail decided to take over. He elbowed his way to a position just in front of Blakton.

"Listen, Mac," he said, the full authority of his uniform and badge and gun echoing in his voice, "let's just get something straight. You're a visitor here, and as long as you behave we'll get along just fine. But don't give me any of that Authority stuff, or I'll run you in so fast it'll make your head swim. So just keep in line."

The little man in the spaceship got very angry. He had been upset and irritable before, but now he was extremely angry with the ser-

geant. "I've had just about enough of this, you simple clown," he exploded. "Now you turn right around and skedaddle out of here or I'll stun you."

"Are you threatening me?" the sergeant growled.

"You bet your stupid life I'm threatening you," the visitor snapped back.

The sergeant shrugged elaborately and half-turned to the crowd. "You folks all heard him," he announced. "He is threatening a police officer in the proper performance of his duty. Okay, bub," he returned his attention to the stranger, "you're under arrest!" He unsnapped his holster and drew his revolver. "Now just step down out of that thing and come forward with your hands up, and nobody'll get hurt."

Supervisor Blakton was very unhappy at the turn of events; particularly so, since the play seemed to have been taken out of his hands. He laid a restraining hand on the sergeant's arm. "Let us not be hasty," he said in a low voice. "Let's try to reason with him. After all, he's new here, he probably doesn't understand."

The sergeant shook off the Supervisor's hand. "He threatened me," he answered

loudly, "and he's going to find out that it don't pay."

Watching this tense scene from the doorway of his craft, the visitor gradually relaxed, and suddenly threw back his head and roared with laughter. For a full minute he stood there, head thrown back, peals of uncontrollable laughter ringing out over the crowd. When his guffaws subsided enough to allow him to talk, he said, "Why, bless me, I believe you're serious."

"You're darn tootin' I'm serious," answered the non-plussed sergeant, taking a step forward, his gun trained on the stranger. "Now just step down out of there."

"I don't know if you people can appreciate this." The stranger's voice shook with repressed laughter. "But you look like characters out of a comic opera. This, this buffoon," he pointed at the scowling sergeant, "holding that . . . what do you call that thing? Oh, really, it's too much!" He giggled happily.

"This is a gun, buster," the police officer said. "And I'm warning you not to try anything funny."

"All right, my foolish friend," the visitor said, "I'll have to bring you up to date." He extended an arm till his

forefinger pointed directly at the sergeant's gun. A flash of light streaked from the tip of his finger to the weapon, and, with a grunt of alarm, the officer dropped the lump of molten metal he found he was holding. A gasp went up from the crowd, and Supervisor Blakton burrowed his way into the thick of it. He was a peaceable man. The three troopers who comprised the sergeant's detail went into action; deploying in a semi-circle around the spaceship, they advanced warily, their guns in their hands. Three quick flicks of the stranger's finger left them disarmed and shocked, staring at the remnants of their weapons.

For a moment nobody knew what to do, except the crowd, which edged backward away from the center of danger. Then the local police made their move. Five of them, and one part-time cop, crouched, drew their pistols and advanced. Before they could call on the stranger to surrender, they had joined their brother officers in a state of shock. None of them had been harmed, it was the blinding speed with which nine experienced policemen had been disarmed, and the complete destruction of their weapons, which had stupefied them.

Only Leroy Campbell, whose lawn was being littered with small lumps of metal, kept his head and thought clearly. While this was going on and guns were dropping like overripe apples, he crept unnoticed into his house and put in a call to State Trooper Headquarters. In a few whispered words, he made the situation fairly clear. The trooper on duty, a former lieutenant in the U. S. Army, relayed the news to the National Guard units in the area. Their response was creditable. Within minutes, a National Guard tank, of early World War II vintage, was rumbling along the highway. Troops followed in trucks.

The tank arrived to find the crowd standing at some distance from the ship, and the stranger back inside his craft, pouring over what appeared to be maps. The tank commander rolled his vehicle into position in front of the crowd and made a great show of aiming the 75mm gun at the invader. It swung this way and that, elevating and depressing the muzzle until it came to rest squarely on target. This was calculated to be a strong psychological approach. The commander did not want to shoot if any other

course were available. The hatch popped open and his head appeared, clad in helmet and very imposing.

"Hey, you!" he called out. "By the power invested in me during this present emergency, I call upon you to surrender in the name of the Governor of this State and the President of the United States." It didn't make too much sense but it sounded authoritative, which was the big point.

The stranger looked the tank over slowly, inspecting it with great interest. "I suppose there are more of you inside that tin contraption?" he inquired mildly.

"Well yes, there are," the commander admitted. "But that is entirely beside the point. I'm calling upon you to surrender."

"My goodness, what won't you people come up with next?" the stranger chuckled. "Are you going to call up the archers? Or maybe it will be the spearmen. Ah, that should be it! A phalanx of spearmen would make a brave sight."

"Look here," shouted the exasperated commander, "are you or are you not going to surrender?"

In answer, the visitor wagged his forefinger so that a

line from its tip played over the entire surface of the tank. Immediately, wisps of smoke began to curl up from the steel surface, and the crew—including the commander—scrambled pell mell out of the blistering hot vehicle. They watched open-mouthed as it settled into a puddle of fused metal.

The little band of law enforcement and military men had now grown to considerable proportions, but they lacked any idea of what to do. It was very difficult to evolve a plan of action against an enemy who could melt armor plate with a waggle of the finger. There was no telling what might ensue if the intruder should get really worked up and exert himself.

Through a sort of peristaltic effect within the crowd, Supervisor Blakton found himself inched forward and again deposited between them and the spaceship. There was nothing for him to do now but to address the stranger, who seemed rather amused at the consternation he was causing.

"My dear sir," Blakton began, licking his lips and smiling nervously, "what exactly do you want?"

"Ah, that's better. Much better," the stranger answered him. "Let us start at the

beginning. Is there present among you one, one will be all I need, just one intelligent person with whom I might have a few words?" He spoke pleasantly, but everyone within earshot caught the heavy sarcasm in his tone.

Nobody among the military, the law enforcement personnel, the politicians or the lookers-on claimed to be intelligent. Each turned to his neighbor as if to say, "You're intelligent, you speak to him." But none did, and for the moment things were stalemated, as the look of amusement on the stranger's face wore thinner, and so did his patience.

The indecision was settled by the arrival, with great clattering, of the truckloads of troops. The men clambered down and formed ranks. Military orders sounded as the soldiers fell in, and a hurried consultation ensued between the unhorsed tank commander and the colonel in charge of the newly-arrived contingent. Three bazooka squads were sent off to encircle the spaceship and the colonel, a major and two captains, all armed with carbines, advanced on the stranger. The colonel kept his weapon slung over his shoulder, but the other officers held theirs at

the hip, trained on the invader.

When they got to within a few yards of their quarry, the colonel and his party halted. "I'm Colonel Nichols," he remarked affably. "We thought we might be able to help."

"You'd help yourself a great deal, Colonel," the strange man answered without heat, "if you'd have your playmates put away their little toys."

"Can't do that, old man," the colonel replied, in the cultured tones of a reasonable gentleman. "After all, we're army, you know. But I'm sure we can settle this affair to everybody's satisfaction. Now if you'll just step over here a minute . . ."

"Colonel, I'm getting tired of this tomfoolery. Now tell your little friends to put those things away, or I shall have to remove them."

The officers tightened their grips on their weapons until the whiteness of their knuckles was easily seen. Hardly anyone took a breath, and the main body of troops seemed poised to move at the instant signal of hostile action. In which direction they would move was not completely clear.

The colonel spoke first.

"I'm afraid we can't be put in the position of laying down our arms, old man. Military honor and so forth. Fact is, I shall have to insist that you come down from your ship. If you don't mind, sir," he added, in an attempt to soften his order.

"You leave me no choice, colonel," the stranger replied, a smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "And now, so much for your weapons!" He raised an arm and pointed his finger. A gasp went up from the crowd, and the people shrank back. But nothing happened. A look of annoyance crossed the intruder's face, and he shook his hand and pointed again. Nothing happened. The stranger frowned in disgust and shook his hand violently, pounding it against his chest. Once more he straightened a forefinger and pointed dramatically—and once more all was as before. Nothing happened.

It suddenly dawned on the military, the police, and the rest of the crowd, that something had gone wrong with the man from outer space and that he had, for the moment at least, suffered a loss of power. Everyone surged forward at once, and within seconds the intruder found himself in the iron grip of the

military police, both arms locked securely behind his back. His soft struggles soon ceased and he became a panting, indignant, non-resisting prisoner.

In Washington, meanwhile, things were different.

Military Intelligence took over, clamped a shroud of secrecy about the whole affair and did not allow any questions to be asked of or answered for the prisoner. A committee appointed by the Secretary of Defense assembled to investigate him. Officers from all branches of the services joined with selected scientists for this venture. They gathered in a highly secret conference room at the Pentagon, and the invader was brought in. He was seated at a circular table, around which the investigators also took their places. His wrists were handcuffed to the arms of his chair, below table level, so that he could not point his devastating finger at the interrogators. Questions were fired at him from all points of the table.

"Who are you?"

"Where do you come from?"

"What did you come here for?"

But he remained silent and would not answer anything. Finally, when the first storm of questions had blown itself out and silence hovered momentarily, he spoke.

"I shall say nothing at all until you take these infernal things off my wrists. Really, gentlemen, this is no longer amusing. You behave like savages."

"Come, come, sir," General Sherman said. "You know very well you go around melting tanks and pistols and things with your finger. Do you think us fools, that we would allow you to have free movement with that finger?"

"Oh, it isn't my finger at all, as you'd have figured out if you had any sense at all," the stranger replied testily. "It's a simple sonray, and the blamed thing has gone out of whack anyhow. Now, if we're going to have anything further to say to each other, release my hands."

"Do you mean to say that you did those things with a machine?" Admiral Jacobs asked. "You don't have any personal power?"

"Personal power, my foot!" the prisoner snorted. "I told you, it's an ordinary sonray. It's in my breast pocket. My finger simply serves as a directional antenna."

A colonel of the Marines got up and walked over to the stranger. A brisk search revealed a slim black box in the prisoner's breast pocket. A fine wire trailed from the box, through a slit within the pocket, and rested against his bare chest. The colonel pulled it out and laid the device in the center of the table.

"That is the . . . the, er . . . sonray?" General Sherman asked.

"Well, what does it look like, a bow and arrow?" the prisoner returned angrily.

"Now, sir," General Sherman said, "that sort of attitude will get us nowhere. Please try to answer our questions civilly."

"I'll answer nothing at all until you release my hands," the invader said with finality. He hunched down in the chair as far as the manacles would allow him, and stared moodily at the tabletop.

A hurried buzz of half-whispered conversation ensued, regarding the advisability of freeing the prisoner's hands. The scientist present swung the decision.

General Sherman turned to the prisoner and said, "Will you give us your word that you are not in possession of any further weapons, and

that you will not attempt violence of any sort if we eliminate the handcuffs?"

The prisoner gave his word. But then a last-minute conference had to be held; certain of the officers present still objected. A scientist asked the deciding question, "What can we possibly hope to gain from this episode unless the man talks?" he asked. It was agreed to chance it. The manacles were removed.

The man from space rubbed his wrists and assumed a more comfortable position, as the slim black box was passed around the table and handled and examined by the committee members.

Dr. Felix Radjenski asked the first question. "How does it work?" he said.

The prisoner thought that one over for a moment. "Well," he answered finally, "you've got to be grounded, of course, and then you point a finger. Any finger would work, but I used this one." He held up a forefinger for all to see.

"Yes, yes, I'm aware of that," Dr. Radjenski forced a smile. "What I mean is, what is the functional theory? How is the machine constructed? What is the power source?"

"Why, I haven't the slight-

est idea," the invader said, looking innocently about the table. "I'm not a mechanic, gentlemen. If I were, I assure you I would have fixed the silly thing." Then he added in a lower voice, "And I wouldn't be here now."

"Let us try starting at the beginning," General Sherman said, rapping his pencil sharply on the table to silence several scientists who were anxious to pursue the questioning. "To begin with, where do you come from? Are you from this planet?"

The prisoner looked around the table with obvious distaste. "Oh, dear me, no!" he answered with a shudder. "At first, I thought I had stumbled onto a little pocket that had somehow defied progress—but now I'm sure this could never exist anywhere near home."

"It should be a simple matter to clear up," General Sherman smiled. "Can you tell us which planet you call home?"

"Naturally. Planet 5AL0-083."

"I beg your pardon." Dr. Keil broke into the questioning. "What does that mean? I'm an astronomer, you know," he added, by way of explaining his interest.

"Why it means, of course, that I live on Planet 5AL0-083," the invader said, as if talking to a child.

Dr. Keil cleared his throat. "Maybe we can do it differently. Your planet has a sun?"

"Yes. My planet has a sun."

"Which sun is it?" Dr. Keil asked gently. "That is to say, which star is your sun?"

The stranger turned to General Sherman. "Maybe I had better talk to you," he said. "My planet has only one sun. It comes up in the daytime, and the stars come out at night, when the sun is not there any more. Do you think you could explain that to him?" he asked, pointing to the astronomer.

"My good man," Dr. Keil sounded a bit huffy, "are you not aware that the sun is a star?"

"I'm not an astronomer," the man said simply.

General Sherman sighed and rapped for attention. "Let us go back to the beginning," he said. "You came here, from wherever you started, in that craft you arrived in, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Good. Then you must know something about the operation of the ship. Would

you be good enough to explain what you know about that."

"There's not much I can tell you about it, I'm afraid," the man said.

"Look, sir," the general said with a forced patience, "our engineers have been over your craft and can make nothing of it. They can't seem to locate any source of power. No fuel. Can you merely explain how it operates?"

The stranger brightened. "Oh, yes," he assured them. "First you call and have it delivered, giving a rough idea as to your destination. When it arrives, you pop in, dial your locale and away you go! They bill you later."

"Who," the general was still trying to be patient, "whom do you call?"

"The taxi company, of course. Whom did you think you would call, the butcher?"

The man's attitude did nothing to soothe the frayed tempers in the room.

"Are you calling that ship a taxi?" Dr. Radjenski asked incredulously.

"Certainly."

"And you mean you just went for a taxi ride across space?" General Sherman said.

"Not intentionally, I assure you," the prisoner answered. "I was just on my way to my

office. I called the taxi as I do almost every day. But this time something obviously went wrong. I wound up here."

"Incredible!" Admiral Jacobs breathed.

"From the weapon you carried, and the craft in which you arrived," Dr. Keil said, "I gather your planet is further along the way, scientifically, than we are."

"Oh my, yes," the stranger said fervently. "Why, seeing the way you people operate is like opening a book on ancient history. Although I'm not much of an expert on that," he added.

"Can you tell us about life on your planet. Everyday life, I mean," Dr. Radjenski asked. "How you live, what sort of equipment is used, things like that."

For the next several hours, the invader, who said his name was Rellek, described life on Planet 5AL0083. From his story it was evident that scientifically his home planet was far into the future. What completely defeated the men at the conference was that Rellek could describe the *effect* of many machines and devices, but could not begin to explain *how* they worked. He was apparently a man of some means and, mostly as

a hobby, ran a small stamp-trading business. He was very upset at the effect his disappearance would have on his friends and associates at home—but he didn't have the slightest idea of how to attempt to return. Neither the military nor the scientific minds in the conference room could help him there, because he was unable to give them even enough information to start making a plan.

It was General Sherman who made the motion to adjourn. "Gentlemen," he said, "I believe we have gained all the information it is possible for us to obtain at this time, and I suggest we adjourn for the day and confer again tomorrow. In the meantime, if anyone present evolves an idea of how we had best proceed, we will take it up at our next meeting. Mr. Rellek, I am sure I speak for my colleagues when I tell you that it has been a distinct pleasure meeting you."

"Thank you, General," Rellek replied, getting to his feet, "my pleasure, I'm sure. Now if you can direct me to a hotel, I'll get a little rest, which I need rather badly. You do have hotels?"

"Yes, we have hotels," the general answered, averting

his eyes momentarily. "But you see, I'm afraid you're still in custody. You will be held in the U. S. Marshal's detention cell until your case has been disposed of."

"I'll be held where?" Rellek quivered in indignation. This had gone *too far*.

"I'm afraid there's nothing I can do about it," General Sherman said.

"You'd just better do something," Rellek shouted, knowing full well that his threat was utterly empty. "What charge can you make against me, eh?"

The general looked across the table to the Marine colonel, who stood up, cleared his throat and read off a long list of crimes which included trespassing, destruction of Government property, resisting arrest, littering property, and threatening an officer of the law. The colonel was prepared to read on, but General Sherman silenced him. "There, you see?" he said to the prisoner. "If you are convicted of these charges, you'll be shuttling back and forth between civil and military prisons for some two hundred and fifty years. Now, that isn't to say you'll be prosecuted on all counts—but for the moment, you had better go along with the Marshal.

We'll send for you when we need you."

"It's an outrage," Rellek cried, alternately pounding the table and shaking his fist. "I won't go. You can't make me."

But, at a signal from the general, the door opened and a marshal and two husky deputies entered the room and took the man from space into custody. He did go. It turned out they could make him.

Rellek sat on the hard bench in his cell, staring disconsolately at the floor. How could he have gotten into this mess, he wondered? It was unbelievable that in this modern age such things could happen. In his entire life, the only violence with which he had been familiar was what he had read. Nobody resorted to actual physical force any more, he mused, shaking his head. He had read about such things as armed police and armies—but to think that things like that actually existed at this late date was fantastic. And here these people were really using antiques like pistols and long guns. Why, at home the only arms, if you could call them that, were the sonray and the repeller belt. But these were for

emergency use and though almost everyone wore them, they were rarely, if ever, used as weapons.

Suddenly he jumped to his feet and slapped his forehead smartly with his hand. Then, abruptly, he clasped both hands to his middle, checking. Yes, it was there. The thing had been part of his garb for so long without use that he had forgotten completely about it. But it was there, all right. He had the repeller belt with him. He checked to make sure no guard was watching him, and then sat down to figure out how to work the device. If he remembered correctly, it was the giant buckle in the center. He pressed it tightly with the palm of his hand. It depressed slightly. He walked to the center of his cell and pressed it again; then he twisted it. It turned smoothly, a half-turn to the right. Now then, he thought, if the thing was in working order, he should be surrounded by a field a foot and a half thick, which would repel anything.

He approached the bars of his cell gingerly to test the belt; nothing seemed different. As he came within range, the bars bulged gently outward. He was satisfied. He stepped back. Retreating to

the center of the cell once again, he called the guard.

A burly man answered his shouts by peering into the cell. "What do you want?"

"Do you know who I am?" Rellek said.

"Yeah." The answer was an uninterested grunt.

"Well, then," Rellek continued, "I must warn you not to try to stop me or to take any action against me, because I am leaving this place now."

"Listen, buddy," the guard said, with a great show of patience, "I've heard who you are, or who you *say* you are, so just be a good boy and take a nap or something. You're not goin' anywheres just now."

"I'm afraid I'll have to insist," Rellek replied firmly, "so please step back. I'm not quite sure how the thing works, and I wouldn't want anyone to be hurt."

The guard's eyes narrowed and he slipped a black leather billy from a rear trouser pocket. He slapped it menacingly in the palm of his hand, and a hard note replaced the patience in his voice. He stepped close to the bars.

"Get your butt on that bench," he growled, "and keep it there. If you know

what's good for you, you won't let me hear a peep out of you."

Rellek drew a deep breath, gathering his resolve. He held it for a moment and then expelled it. "Stand back," he said, "I'm coming through."

He advanced toward the bars, taking slow, deliberate steps. The guard tensed, then his eyes bulged, as he stared at the unlikely sight of the steel bars bending slowly outwards. The closer Rellek approached them, the farther away from him they bent, until with a loud screech of tortured metal they snapped in the center and bent fully open.

Rellek stepped through, carefully picking his way over the twisted steel, as the guard backed away. At last the guard's nerve broke and he turned, running wildly down the corridor. He managed to get his whistle between his lips, and as he rounded the corner he was emitting shrill alarms with what breath he could spare.

Rellek glanced after the retreating man and smiled with satisfaction. So far, so good, he thought. He patted his belt buckle affectionately and proceeded down the hall. It took a bit of getting used

to, he found. If he strayed too close to a wall, it creaked ominously as it strained away from his protective screen. Wandering down several corridors, on the way to the street, he came upon more than one locked door. These crashed to the floor as he neared them, enabling him to walk through with no trouble.

Noticing that a group of men were following him cautiously, a discreet distance in his rear, he turned and addressed them. "Is any of you gentlemen in charge of this . . . this dungeon?" he asked.

"N-no, sir," one of the uniformed men answered hastily. "We're guards, sir; we just work here."

"Ah, too bad," Rellek murmured. "I would have liked to talk to the keeper of this zoo. Imagine, putting men behind bars." He snorted and was about to move off, when a commotion occurred at the rear of the group of guards and a man, whose figure ran to flesh and was swathed in civilian clothes, pushed his way to the front. He faced Rellek in silence. He looked about him, taking in the damage that had been wrought, and then he whispered to one of the guards, who answered into his ear. As the guard

ended his story, the fat man's eyes widened and he nudged his way partly back into the crowd, so that one or two men almost blocked him from Rellek's view.

"Now you look here," he yelled down to the man from space, "I'm the warden of this station, and I'm ordering you back to your cell at once. I'm warning you that I consider this an attempt to escape from custody."

"No," Rellek said. "Really?"

"Yes," the warden replied. "And unless you return immediately, I shall be forced to take action."

Rellek waved his hand airily. "I would like nothing better than to remain and bandy words with you, warden," he said; "there are, in fact, quite a few things I would like to talk to you about. But I'm afraid my time is limited. Good-bye." He turned to leave, but paused at a shout from the warden. He faced the official, to find that the beefy man had drawn a pistol and was pointing it, none too steadily, in his direction.

"Halt! Halt, or I'll shoot!" The warden's words carried conviction, but the voice quavered.

"Now you put that thing down," Rellek cried, pointing

at the pistol. He had been faced with these antiquated weapons before, and they infuriated him. The warden gasped and dropped the pistol. Then, when nothing happened, he stooped and picked it up, scolding one of his men for jostling it out of his hand.

"That pointing business won't work any more," he called to Rellek. "I happen to know that. So you'd just better give up peacefully."

Rellek stared at him in cold disdain. He lifted an eyebrow. "I won't have to point, warden," he said. "I'm leaving. If you want to shoot, go ahead."

He turned again and proceeded down the hall towards the front door. The warden's voice came spiralling down the corridor after him. It was almost a falsetto, it was so frenzied. "Now halt, I said. Halt, do you hear me? Halt or I'll shoot, I said. All right, then, you are forcing me to shoot!"

Rellek looked over his shoulder just as the boom of the pistol reverberated in the closed area, bouncing off the walls. There was a shoosh of air and a sharp ping. A flattened slug fell to the floor some eighteen inches from Rellek.

The men at the other end

of the hall, who had been ready to rush forward to capture the fallen body of the fleeing prisoner, recoiled in horror. The warden was left standing alone a few feet in front of them. His reason was shattered by the impact of panic, and he stood there, grasping the pistol in both hands and pulling the trigger as fast as he could work his finger. Five shots crashed from the weapon; those bullets which did not bury themselves wildly in the wall, were flattened against Rellek's shield. The warden continued to pull the trigger until his senses returned and the dry metallic click of the hammer falling on an empty chamber brought him back to reality. Then he saw that he was alone, a foolish figure firing an empty gun. The guards behind him had vanished at the opening of his wild fusillade, and Rellek had simply walked out the door.

It was dark outside. And cool, and pleasant. It was also, for Rellek, a time of indecision. His vague wish was to return to his ship, in a desperate vain hope that somehow it could be made to work again and return him to reality. The main obstacle to this course lay in the fact that

he did not have the slightest idea where his ship was. The maze of streets, flanked by old-fashioned massive stone buildings, was too much for him.

As he wandered, trying to resolve his mental confusion, he was thankful that the streets were almost deserted. The few pedestrians who were about minded their own business, unaware that they shared the sidewalk with the man from space.

A sudden series of sharp, tack-hammer sounds startled him, and he whirled to see a woman running along the sidewalk toward him. It was Miss Bentley, the secretary of the Interrogation Board. She ran, waving her handbag at him and calling, "Oh, Mr. Rellek, Mr. Rellek, wait!"

Rellek turned to face her, rather glad to have someone to talk to. Her short legs pumped in strides which strained the material of her skirt at every step; she was smiling as she crashed into his invisible shield and landed flat on her back on the sidewalk. The smile vanished abruptly. She heaved to a sitting position, her hat tilted at a ridiculous angle over one eye. Horrified at the accident he had caused, Rellek bent over her, stretching out a

hand to help her up. As he bent, the field bent with him and promptly knocked her flat again.

"Get away from me, you big . . . you big oaf!" Miss Bentley sputtered.

Rellek stepped back and muttered apologies. "Oh, dear," he said, "I'm so sorry. I had no idea. I didn't mean to . . ."

"All right, all right," Miss Bentley said, sitting up again. "Only don't come near me again until you shut that thing off."

"Certainly, Miss Bentley," Rellek said, surprised that he had remembered her name. He fumbled with his buckle and turned off the shield. Then he helped her to her feet. It took a minute to rearrange her hair and hat and unruffle the feathers of her disposition. When she had returned to normal again, she was full of concern for the strange little man.

"Oh, Mr. Rellek," she clucked, "you're in trouble. You've done some perfectly awful things."

"I haven't really done anything, Miss Bentley," Rellek said plaintively. "I didn't want to come here in the first place, and I most certainly don't want to stay. I just

want to go home," he ended, looking very crestfallen.

"Why of course you do, you poor dear," she agreed sympathetically. "We must seem very peculiar to you. Almost like savages, I suppose."

"Complete savages," he breathed fervently and then, seeing the hurt in her eyes, he added gallantly, "at least the men act like savages. You're not married, Miss Bentley? But then, how foolish of me, you'd be called Mrs. Bentley if you were a married woman."

"You *are* a surprising soul, indeed," she said. "You seem to know so much about our ways—and yet you seem so helpless to understand some of the things we do."

"I'm afraid you're right, Miss Bentley; but you see, certain aspects of your social system are remarkably like ours on 5AL0083, while others . . ." he raised his eyebrows and shook his head, ". . . positively medieval."

"What a pity you couldn't get to know us as we really are," she sighed. "I'm sure you would like us. But I suppose you can't, because if they catch you now, there's no telling what they'd do. They were very angry back at the station, but they're afraid to come after you. They're mo-

bilizing the military, you know."

"Oh, dear," Rellek said, alarm creeping into his voice. "I've no idea what I shall do."

"That belt thing of yours seems to take care of you pretty well," Miss Bentley said, eyeing the buckle curiously. "At least it worked beautifully at the station, I've heard."

"Yes, but heaven knows how long it will go on working. I have no faith at all in mechanical gadgets. They go wrong so often." His eyes narrowed suddenly, and he asked, "But how did you know it was my belt that I was using?"

She gave a little laugh. "Oh, that was easy. I knew it had to be something you turned on—and when I asked you to turn it off, you did something with your buckle. See?"

"My goodness, Miss Bentley," Rellek said, smiling, "it seems that even on your planet a great deal of the common sense lies within the female brain."

"You're sweet. But now what on Earth are you going to do?"

He scratched his head. "I don't know, Miss Bentley, I really don't know. If I could at least find my taxi, I'd see

if I could get it going, or something. But I don't even know where it is."

"A taxi?" she asked in bewilderment. "Why, we can always get a taxi. But where would you go?"

"No, no! I mean my vehicle. The one I came in."

She brightened. "Oh, that's no problem," she said, taking him by the arm. "I can take you to that. It's lying in the open on a big flat truck. It's parked in the lot about six blocks from here."

"Will there be anybody guarding it?" Rellek asked nervously.

"No. You see, they're assembling a team of scientists to go over the thing and examine it . . . but there's nobody been assigned to guard it, I'm sure. Except the attendant, of course, and he wouldn't stop me. Or anyone with me," she added.

"Will you take me to it, then?" he asked eagerly.

She patted his hand. "Of course," she said. They started off together.

Everything went as Miss Bentley had predicted. Her familiar face, her responsible position, got them through the gate; once inside, they became lost to view in the quiet pandemonium of massed

vehicles. They found the large truck, and Rellek stared in joy at his shiny taxi.

"Oh, this is wonderful, Miss Bentley. I don't know how to thank you."

"Don't even think of it. I'd be happy to do anything I could to help you. You're such a nice man." Her eyelids fluttered in embarrassment. "But I haven't really helped you at all, have I? I mean the thing, the taxi, is still on the fritz."

"Fritz?"

"I mean it doesn't work, does it?"

He looked at the craft for a long time, as if trying to will it to work. "It'll just have to go," he said. "I can't bear to think of what will happen if it doesn't." He shuddered. "But what about you? If I am lucky enough to get away, what will they do to you?"

"Oh, tush," she said, waving a dainty hand. "What can they do to me?"

"Well, helping me to escape, and all. They don't seem to take my case lightly."

"Oh, they're just a bunch of overgrown boys." She smiled. "They wouldn't have the slightest idea of what to do without me. Who else could understand what their mumbling means? And who would get them their soda pills and aspirin before they

even knew they needed them? Why, I can tell by General Sherman's voice when he's about to have an attack of indigestion."

"You are an understanding woman," Rellek said, squeezing her hand. "I . . . I don't know how to say this, but . . . I mean, if I can get this thing going, would you . . . that is to say, do you suppose you'd like to try . . ."

She shook her head and smiled sweetly into his eyes. "No, dear, sweet Mr. Rellek." Her eyes were moist. "I would love to, really, but it wouldn't work, because my place is here. I know that. You have to leave, and my prayers will go with you. I'll think of you always."

Rellek leaned toward her and kissed her gently on the cheek. "Good-bye, my dear one," he said. "I shall never forget you."

Then he turned, and climbed up onto the truck and into the ship. He stumbled twice because his eyes were clouded with mist. He settled himself in the seat and leaned toward the door to say something final to Miss Bentley. Before he could speak he became aware of a sudden commotion at the entrance to the lot, and he could see a large group of

soldiers entering and making their way, with flashing lights, toward his truck. Miss Bentley waved at him to close the door and he lost no time in following her advice. The hatch swung to and insulated him from the growing clamor outside. He could see nothing, nor did he wish to.

Frantically, he pushed and pulled every lever and button and switch in the compartment—but nothing worked. He prodded each rivet and bump he could find, hopelessly, then gave himself over to despair and sat numbly staring at the floor. Realizing that he had to do something, and that the belt seemed to be his only refuge, he prepared to switch it on and face his tormentors. As he looked down, his eye was caught by the flickering needle of the speed indicator, and he gaped. He was traveling at incredible speed! He felt nothing. Was this, he wondered, some trick of the fiends outside? Or was he, in fact, actually moving? And if so, where to?

His thoughts were dispelled by the crackling of the loud-speaker in the compartment. "Mr. Rellek?" a voice said. "Mr. Rellek, can you hear me? Are you all right?"

"Of course I'm all right,"

he shouted. "Who in blazes are you?"

"This is Mr. Santini of the Excelsior Taxi Service, sir. I'm right alongside you. I'm going to couple on and come into your ship."

"Wait a minute!" Rellek wasn't going to be duped if he could help it. "If you're Santini, what's your call number?"

"3203KM, Mr. Rellek—you know that." Santini's voice was puzzled.

"Come on in," Rellek said wearily as he relaxed. He sagged back in his seat for a minute gathering strength, and when Santini finally came through the hatch he stood up.

"Mr. Santini," he said, "this is an outrage. Never in my life have I ever heard of such a thing. Believe me, when we get back home, things will be stirred up."

"I'm terribly sorry, sir. We've never had anything like this happen before. Apparently your receiver must have picked up some stray wave and followed it instead of the prescribed course. It had us worried."

"It had *you* worried!" Rellek steamed. "Have you any idea of what it did to me?"

"I'm sure it must have been dreadful, sir," Santini said

calmly. "But you didn't do much to help, did you, sir?"

"Me help? How could I possibly help?"

"Why, the emergency button, sir. Here, the red one, on the ceiling," Santini pointed. "If you had pushed that, we could have gotten a line on you. We searched on every wavelength known, but we were helpless, you see, until you pushed that button. We're pulling you in."

Rellek was abashed. It came back to him now; the briefing all new customers received in the operation of the taxis. But it had been so long ago, and he hadn't paid too close attention, anyhow. Gadgets always confused him.

"Oh, I see," he said.

Now that it was over, his anger evaporated, and he thought fondly back to Miss Bentley. What a sweet woman! If women like that lived back home, he would not remain a bachelor much longer, he ruminated.

"I wonder, Mr. Santini," Rellek said, "have you ever heard of a planet called Earth?"

"Why, of course, sir," Santini answered easily. "We got that in third grade, I think."

"We did? I didn't remember."

"Oh, sure. That's what our planet was called in ancient times. That's good old 5AL0-083."

THE END

Test Your Space I. Q.

Listed below are ten famous scientific "firsts." Can you pick out the correct year each one occurred? Seven correct answers is passing; 8-9 is good; 10 excellent. (Answers on page 130)

1. First Ascent into the Stratosphere 1921, 1925, 1931
2. First Transatlantic Radio Signal 1901, 1906, 1911
3. First Balloon Flight in America 1773, 1783, 1793
4. First Atlantic Cable Message 1848, 1858, 1868
5. First Use of Ether in Childbirth 1845, 1855, 1865
6. First TV Station Installed 1928, 1934, 1940
7. First Radio Broadcast 1915, 1920, 1925
8. First Two-Way Telephone Conversation 1872, 1874, 1876
9. First Telegraph Message 1834, 1844, 1854
10. First Transcontinental Telephone 1905, 1910, 1915

MOON OF DEATH

By E. K. JARVIS

The obstacles in Ronson's path put his chances of survival at zero. But he had to remain alive or a world would die.

SHADOWS were falling on the huge world of Viron as Lee Ronson made his way through the market place. It was getting along toward nightfall and Demerong, the prison moon, the moon as big as Earth and twice as evil, was climbing in the sky.

The molded plastic of his face mask itched, but Ronson kept his hand in his pocket, clenched around the ultragun. He resisted the temptation to rip away the mask and reveal to all that he was an Earthman. It would be sure death. They would tear him apart in seconds.

Friction between Earth and Viron was at its worst now. The cold war that had spread over half the galaxy had come to a peak with the brutal murder of the eight

hapless Terran traders on Viron a month before. Ronson knew he was taking his life in his hands by coming to the big world, even disguised as he was behind the pocked mask of a Netralite.

But someone has to do the job, he told himself grimly.

The marketplace was closing down for the night now. Ronson passed counters of vile-smelling Vironian vegetables rotting after a day's neglect, and turned down a dark side-street. The palace of Thetlang D'hu was visible up ahead. Ronson felt the slight bulge of the mind-tapper against his thigh, and tensed.

"If you're caught, we can't help you," they told him on Earth. "An agent of Solar System Police doesn't have



The prisoners were pushed off brutally—sent hurtling to the prison planet below.

any call spying on an alien out-system world."

"I know. I won't ask for help if I'm caught."

"Don't. You won't get it."

That was hardly a comforting conversation for Ronson to recall as he drew closer to the Overlord's palace. He knew the Vironians would show no mercy if they discovered a spy from Earth. His only hope, if caught, was that they wouldn't bother to look beneath his disguise. There was no official death penalty on Viron; natives and friendly aliens caught in criminal acts were merely banished to Demerong, the prison moon. Posing as a Netralite, he stood a chance. As an Earthman, none.

He huddled for a moment in an alleyway as a Peace Officer came by, swinging his heavy neuron-whip. Then he moved ahead. The palace grounds began a block ahead.

He wouldn't need to get inside the palace himself; not if he could plant the mind-tapper in a useful position. As he drew near, he slid the tiny needle that was the mind-tapper's transmitter out of his pocket and into the palm of his hand. He cupped it; then he drew a platinum five-munit piece from his

other pocket and put it in the same hand.

A Vironian guard stood at the entrance to the palace, brandishing a deadly ultra-wave rifle. The guard looked at Ronson coldly, yellow eyes flickering in the blue face.

"Yes, Netralite?"

"I would see the Overlord, guard."

"Thetlang D'hu will see no one at this hour, outworlder."

Ronson smiled. "I have important information for him. Information about Earth." Grinning wolfishly, he raised his hand so the five-munit piece glittered momentarily in the bright moonlight. "This is yours if you can arrange an interview for me."

The guard glanced at the coin, which represented two weeks' pay for him. "I'll talk to the Overlord's private secretary about it. You wait here." The guard extended a hand, and Ronson pressed the coin into it, at the same time forcing the microscopic needle of the transmitter into the horny part of the guard's palm.

"There'll be another coin for you if you succeed," Ronson said.

The guard turned and headed up the walk toward the palace, signaling for another to take his place at the

gate while he was gone. Ronson let out a sigh of relief; the first step had been carried off perfectly. The guard had not even noticed the needle—and now he would be broadcasting any thoughts that came within a ten-yard radius of him.

Ronson leaned against the wall and switched on the receiver. Instantly he picked up the muddled gabble of the guard's thoughts: boredom, suspicion of the Netralite, desire to get off duty and spend the five-munit piece.

Above that came the words he was speaking: *Let me see Secretary Kilong, please.* Ronson detected the mind of another guard.

Then a new mind appeared: sharp, wily. This was the Overlord's private secretary, no doubt. Ronson stiffened and turned up the receiver.

At the top level of the secretary's thoughts came his spoken voice: *No, you can't arrange an appointment with the Overlord. He won't see anyone at this hour.*

Underneath that came impatience and a desire to get back to a chess game within, plus a mass of irrelevant details of the secretary's office routine.

Then came the guard's voice again: *But the Netralite*

says he has information about Earth.

Suddenly a new thought leaped into the secretary's mind, a thought he couldn't suppress quickly enough: SECRET PLAN 106a: SPACE NAVY THREE OF VIRON IS INSTRUCTED TO STAGE A SURPRISE ATTACK ON EARTH AND ITS COLONIES AT 0600 EARTHTIME, MORNING OF SEP 7 3158.

And then the alarm went off.

A siren wailed loudly and the blue shimmer of a force-field clamped down about three feet from Ronson, penning in anyone who happened to be on or near the palace grounds. At the same time the mind-tapper in Ronson's pocket went abruptly dead.

Ronson knew what had happened. Thetlang D'hu probably had tracer-beams playing over the entire palace in constant search for mind-tapping devices. Ronson had been lucky; the secret information he wanted had been forthcoming before the tracer circuits discovered the mind-tap in operation and clamped down the barrier.

But now he was trapped inside the palace. The Vironian guard at the gate was

looking at him suspiciously.

Well, the mind-tapper had served its purpose. He flicked a lever in his pocket, touching off a remote-control disintegrator that would dispose of the evidence planted in the Vironian's hand. The guard would feel a brief, painful puff of heat, but there would be no sign that he had carried the mind-tap transmitter.

With that done, Ronson turned to the other guard. "What's all the noise about?"

The guard shrugged. "Alarm. Maybe someone tried to knock off the Overlord. Happens all the time."

"But that force-field out there—you mean I can't leave the palace grounds?"

"Right. Better grin and bear it, Netralite. Once they find their man there'll be an all-clear."

"Thanks," Ronson said. He sauntered off casually a few steps, then suddenly turned and clubbed down on the back of the Vironian's neck.

The guard sagged. Ronson caught him, deftly removed the charges from his ultra-wave rifle, and propped him up against the gate. Then he turned and started to run toward the palace, while overhead the alarm-siren wailed in anger.

As he ran, he formed his plan. First, find a sub-radio set somewhere and send word to Earth of the Vironian sneak attack. Second, find some way out of the palace. Or, failing that, allow himself to be caught. *He* didn't matter too much, as long as the message got through to Earth in time.

He sprinted up the *kreth*-grass lawn and into the nearest of the big buildings that bordered the main palace building. Guards with flashlights were patrolling the grounds, and he thought he heard the sinister *chuff-chuff* of the mechanical bloodhounds as well.

The building was dark; he shoved open a door with his shoulder and stepped in. With the alarm already sounding, a little additional breakage wouldn't change the situation one bit.

In the dark he wandered through the long room he found himself in, peering around in search of a sub-radio set. Then he realized where he was. He cursed. It was the Overlord's art gallery! The last place where he'd find a way to call Earth!

And there were voices outside.

"Hey—I think there's a prowler in there!"

"In the art gallery? A thief, maybe?"

"Who knows? The alarm went off, didn't it? Let's go in and look around."

Ronson crouched behind a fabulously rare malachite-and-gold statuette from the Andromeda system, waiting, cursing himself for a fool. He had run straight into a dead-end, and now he was caught.

There was only one chance for him. He darted across the room to a glass cabinet containing rare coins, and smashed the case with the butt of his ultragun. He slipped a double handful of coins into his tunic. Then he drew out the receiver of the mind-tapper, pressed the lever that would incinerate it, and hurled it into the darkness. It sputtered brightly for a moment, then was gone.

An instant later three burly figures burst in, and the sudden brightness of flashbeams stung Ronson's eyes.

"There he is!" one of them cried. "Down by the rare coins!"

Ronson yelled and came out of hiding; he took a few tentative running steps, then stopped. He wanted to be caught, not to be incinerated in a futile attempt at escape.

"Okay," he said. "You've got me. I was a fool to try to rob the Overlord's museum."

"Darned right you were. You'll never see Netrali again, outworlder. You'll rot on the prison moon!"

Ronson forced tears to come to his eyes. In the SSP you had to be a good actor. "Never go home again? My starving children, my poor wife . . ."

"They deserve it. You're a lousy thief. You made enough noise for ten." The Vironian drew a pocket communicator from his sash and spoke rapidly into it: "Give me the Overlord's secretary, please."

A moment later a voice said, "This is Kilong speaking."

"Secretary Kilong, we've found the source of the trouble. The alarm went off when a Netralite thief broke into the Overlord's art gallery."

"Good. I was afraid it might be much worse than that."

"What should we do with him? Bring him to you?"

"I can't be bothered. Search him thoroughly and have him dumped on the next ship bound for Demerong. I'll give the word that the alarm's over."

"Yes, sir." Turning to Ronson the guard said, "Come along, you. We'll teach you what happens to those who try to steal from the Overlord."

Some time later that night Ronson opened his eyes to discover that he was at the spaceport of Viron City. He was dizzy and battered; they had really given him a going-over, it seemed.

But he was still alive.

His hands were tied with unbreakable plastimesh and his head felt as if it had been steamrollered. He was facing a seedy-looking Vironian in a spaceman's uniform, and one of the Overlord's guards was digging his horned claws painfully into his shoulder.

"Here's the last one for tonight, Krdryl. He won't give you much trouble. We really let him have it."

Spaceman Krdryl eyed Ronson boredly. "A Netralite, eh? What he do?"

"Tried to break into the Overlord's private museum. The idiot touched off the main alarm system and wasn't smart enough to run."

Krdryl grinned. "Well, he'll get smart on Demerong, if he wants to stay alive down there. And he'll have a whole lifetime to learn shrewdness."

The captain called to a waiting spaceman. "Here—stow this one aboard. Then we blast off for Demerong."

Ronson allowed himself to be bundled roughly aboard the ship and dumped in a stinking hold. There were four or five others there already, all Vironians, all similarly bound in plastimesh. Convicts, going to the dumping ground.

There were no jails on Viron, no elaborate system of fines and sentences, and no ex-cons. There was just one punishment for all crimes on the huge world: deportation to Demerong. Murderers, thieves, prostitutes, swindlers—they all went there. And they never came back. No one was ever known to return.

Viron was the universe's largest planet, bigger even than Jupiter—a hundred thousand miles in diameter. Fortunately a fluke made it livable: it was a lightweight planet, its mass low, its gravity only slightly more than Earth's.

Such a monster world deserved a monster of a moon, and it had one in Demerong—eight thousand miles in diameter, bigger than Earth. Demerong was hell's moon, the dumping ground for the big planet's living refuse.

And within hours Lee Ronson would be there.

He thought back over the way he had performed his assignment, as he huddled in the hold waiting to reach Demerong. It had gone well, for a while. He had the information he needed: Viron was going to pull a sneak attack on Earth six days from now, on September 7. That was what Earth Intelligence had suspected, and he had confirmed it.

If he could get word to Earth some time in the next two or three days, they would have time to deploy defenses. When the "sneak" attack came, Earth would be ready. If not—

Well, he thought, I'm still alive. If I can only escape from Demerong and reach a subspace radio in time—

He couldn't escape from Demerong until he got there, though. And he hadn't had any sleep in three days. He rolled over, trying to ignore the filth all around, and forced himself to accept sleep.

He was wakened by a rough hand clawing his shoulder.

"Come on, Netralite. Enough sleeping for you."

Ronson glanced up. One of

the spacemen stood over him, holding a parachute harness.

"What's that for?"

"That's so you can fly, dearie. We wouldn't want you to get hurt when we dump you down the shoot."

"Aren't you going to land on Demerong?"

The Vironian shook his furry head. "No dice, buster. It's against the law for a ship to land there. We don't want there to be any chance of anyone escaping from Demerong. So we just dump the new arrivals down by parachute, and let them shift for themselves."

Ronson felt a chill cut through him. *No ship ever landed on Demerong? Then how am I going to escape?*

He'd really stuck his head in the noose this time. It would have been smarter trying to escape back on the palace grounds. He might have been killed, but at least he stood a slim chance of getting away to warn Earth of the Vironian attack. Now there was no chance. None at all.

Looking around, he saw the other new convicts were already garbed in their parachutes. There wasn't any chance of pulling anything now. Meekly he held out his shoulders and let the Viro-

nian unseal the plastimesh and wrap the parachute around him.

"Okay, Chief. They're all 'chuted up."

"Good," came a voice from the front. "We're within dumping distance now. March 'em to the back door and heave 'em out fast."

"You heard him," the guard said. "Start moving."

"How does the parachute work?" asked a thin-voiced, pale young Vironian. "I don't know how to use one."

The guard chuckled harshly. "You better find out fast, friend. The ground is awful hard when you hit it without a 'chute."

"But—"

"That's enough talk!" The door swung open. "Out with you!"

Ronson was the third one out. He had a momentary glimpse of a sprawling jungle far beneath him, of the tops of yellow and red trees, and then he stepped out into nothingness and started to drop.

The surface of Demerong roared up to meet him. Calmly he pulled the ripcord and let himself drift down.

In six days, Earth would be attacked by these devils from Viron. And the one man who could give the warning

was drifting slowly toward a prison world from which there was no escape. *Congratulations, Lieutenant Ronson*, he thought bitterly. *You've done a fine job.*

It took a long time to drop. Finally Ronson hung dangling over one of the big trees in the lush forest. Birds chattered in anger at this invasion from the skies.

There was no sign of any of the others who had dropped with him. He wondered oddly if that scared kid had managed to get his parachute open in time. It didn't matter much if he didn't; that sort of greenhorn probably could not survive on Demerong long anyway.

He dropped lightly into the tree and his harness fouled on the branches. Bracing himself carefully on an outjutting limb, Ronson freed himself of the entangled parachute and left it hanging in the tree. Ground was more than a hundred feet below. Gripping the flaky bark tightly, he began to climb downward.

Demerong was hot and sticky. He was covered with sweat before he had gone ten feet. One corner of the sky was filled with the huge sun that illuminated both Deme-

rong and Viron. But even bigger, bulking immense and terrifying in the sky, was Viron itself, the giant planet. Demerong was sufficiently big so that sun and moon could appear in the sky at the same time.

He looked down and saw tiny figures waiting for him.

Men. Prisoners. Waiting to see the newcomer. Beneath his Netralite mask, Ronson's face itched. He wondered if it were safe to unmask here, and decided against it. Probably these convicts would have the same hatred for an Earthman that the people of Viron did. It was simpler to pose as a Netralite, a harmless native of a peaceful world.

"Here comes one of them now," someone grunted beneath him. Ronson continued to clamber downward. When he was ten feet from the ground, he let go and sprang outward, landing lightly on the spongy soil.

Four Vironians faced him. They were sullen-faced, evil-looking men, their blue skin sallow with bad living. They were carrying unsheathed knives. One of them, he saw, had an ultrawave pistol strapped to his belt. Ronson wondered how he had obtained it. His own weapon had

been taken away long ago; he was totally unarmed.

"You just come down?"

Ronson nodded. "I left my 'chute in that tree. My aim wasn't so good."

One of the four Vironians squinted at him strangely, then stared at his companions. "Where's this guy from? I don't remember seeing one like this before."

"He's a Netralite," said the one with the ultragun. "Aren't you, buddy?"

"Right the first time," Ronson said. He mopped away sweat. "Damned hot here, isn't it?"

"You'll get used to it. This hotel don't take short-term guests. What you get sent up for, Netralite?"

"I tried to break into the Overlord's private museum. I wanted to steal some coins."

"Idiot! That place is wired all over."

"So I found out," Ronson said sadly. "But I'm an outworlder. I didn't know the ropes. And I needed cash."

"You won't need any cash down here," said the Vironian. "Just guts and fists, that's all. Only you better learn the ropes fast. We play a hard game down here."

"I'll stick with it," Ronson said. He wondered if he'd

ever see Earth again, or whether he'd actually spend the rest of his life in this thug's paradise.

Suddenly one of the silent Vironians stepped forward and smashed Ronson in the mouth with the back of his hand. Blood oozed from the lips of the mask Ronson wore.

The agent reacted instantly. One fist crashed into the alien's belly; another raked the Vironian's jaw and sent him careening back into a thornbush. Ronson whirled and found himself facing the ultragun.

"Nice going," said the gun-toting Vironian.

"What the hell was that for?" Ronson demanded, looking at the man in the thornbush warily. "Why'd he hit me?"

"Just to see how you fought. You fight good, Netralite. You've got the stuff. But you better be ready to lay it on the line every second of the day. Demerong isn't any world for softies."

"I told you I'd stick with it," Ronson said. "Now you believe me?"

"Yeah. Duvron Chai will be glad to meet you."

"Who the blazes is Duvron Chai, and am I supposed to be glad to meet him?"

The Vironian's eyes nar-

rowed. "Duvron Chai runs this place—and you damn well better be glad to meet him, if you want to go on living long."

Half an hour later they stood outside a filthy-looking shack in the middle of the filthiest collection of shacks Ronson had ever seen.

A thin-faced Vironian with a livid scar across his blue face stuck his head out a door panel.

"Yeah?"

"We want to see Duvron Chai. We brought him one of the new ones that were just dumped."

"Okay. Bring him in."

The door opened and Ronson was propelled inward. He faced someone who could only be Duvron Chai, there was no doubt of that.

He was a Vironian, taller than most—probably seven feet tall when he was standing. But he wasn't standing now. He was sprawling over a rickety throne-like chair, his hands folded over a repulsively fat belly. He wore an ultragun strapped to one fleshy thigh. Ronson wondered how these convicts had gained possession of so many weapons.

"Are you Duvron Chai?"

"I am. And speak when

you're addressed only, Netralite."

As if signaled a waiting Vironian stepped forward and slapped Ronson in the face, reopening the wound of a half hour before. Ronson licked the blood away and said, "That's no way to treat a newcomer, Duvron Chai."

The Vironian slapped him again. This time Ronson brushed the hand away and cracked his fist into the alien's midsection. No one made a move, though Duvron Chai's hand hung poised over the ultrawave gun. Ronson squared off against his new antagonist.

The Vironian's eyes were yellow dots of hate. Ronson grinned and hit the man once, hard. He sprawled backward. The Earthman bowed to Duvron Chai.

"Nicely fought," the fat alien said approvingly. "I sure like your courage, Netralite. What's your name?"

"Thyon vor Sirwan," Ronson said smoothly.

"I like you, Thyon. Give the Netralite a knife," Duvron Chai ordered. One of the waiting Vironians handed him a weapon—homemade, crude but deadly. Ronson stuck it in his belt.

"You're now a member of my police," Duvron Chai said.

"For your information, I'm the law on Demerong—such law as we have, that is. Stick with me and you'll live well. But cross me and I'll take you out to the jungle and lose you there. It won't be a quick death."

Ronson nodded. "I know a good thing when I see it. I'm your man, Duvron Chai."

During the next half hour or so the other new convicts were brought in; Duvron Chai's police force seemed very efficient about picking them up. Ronson was surprised to see the pale boy who had had parachute-troubles among them; evidently he had figured out which cord to pull before it had been too late.

Duvron Chai disposed of them all, assigning two to his police force and putting the other three to work in his labor corps. Ronson watched the fat alien with an emotion close to admiration. Duvron Chai had certainly done an efficient job of carving out an empire here on Demerong.

Ronson wondered what crime he'd been sent here for. It was certainly a major one.

After a while Duvron Chai said, "Show the Netralite where he can stay."

Ronson was conducted to a dingy little hovel not too far from Duvron Chai's shack. Demerong was far from a palatial world, he thought, as he surveyed the roach-ridden cubicle that might be his home for the rest of his life. He decided to stick close to Duvron Chai, work his way into the fat man's confidences. As long as he was exiled here for life, Ronson thought, it might as well be a comfortable life.

But he didn't mean to give up yet. Not at all.

He ate in a slophouse across the street—food was free to members of Duvron Chai's police, he discovered. "Food" consisted of a green-colored steak cut from some nameless local beast, plus a pitcher of foul-smelling yellow beer. Ronson swilled it down and returned to his room.

The sun was sinking now, but giant Viron still hung high in the sky. Ronson glared at the planet bitterly. Viron was in shadow now, a huge reddish-purple grape blotting out a quarter of the sky. In six days—five, now—ships of Viron would rain hell on the cities of Earth.

He dug his nails into his palms. He *had* to warn them. But how? Getting the infor-

mation had been simple, but relaying it to Earth was a different matter.

He drew out the knife Duvron Chai had given him, and rubbed it idly. It was strange, he thought, that Duvron Chai and a few of his lieutenants should have ultraguns. There weren't any factories on this jungle hothouse of a world, and it didn't seem likely the authorities would have permitted these men to bring weapons with them to Demerong.

Ronson's eyes brightened. There had to be a pipeline—a direct contact somewhere between Duvron Chai and the mother world! There was no other explanation for the presence of ultraguns on Demerong.

And if there were a pipeline, there was still some hope left that Ronson might get a message back to Earth.

He jammed the knife back into his belt and stood up. There *had* to be a pipeline. And he was going to find it.

It was nearly midnight before he left his room. Viron was high in the sky, monstrous, bloated. Ronson stared at the giant world with hatred.

Then he began to move through the streets.

There was the sound of drunken singing ahead of him. Three Vironians came staggering out of an alleyway with what looked like a Vironian woman with them. They were all drunk. Ronson side-stepped them contemptuously and moved on.

He felt a hand touch his ankle and looked down. An old man lay there. By his shell-like skin Ronson recognized him as a Dartusian. He stared up at the Earthman in anguish.

"Get me a drink. You gotta get me a drink." His voice was a hoarse croak.

"Get your own," Ronson told him, and kept going.

This world was really the dregs, he thought. Death lurked in every corner, behind every tree. The outcasts of the giant world were here, the filth of all Viron.

No. Not all the filth. Some of it was still up there, scheming to attack Earth. Well, that would be taken care of if he could find some way to warn them.

He reached Duvron Chai's door and knocked gently. The thin-faced watchman popped his head through the panel.

"I want to see Duvron Chai," Ronson whispered.

"He's busy. It's late; come back tomorrow."

"No. It's important. Now! Tonight!"

"Go away, Netralite. The chief will see you in the morning."

Ronson scowled. The door was locked and probably bolted; there wasn't any way he could get in if the watchman wouldn't open up. And if he made a racket Duvron Chai himself might come to investigate. Ronson didn't want that.

The last time he'd wanted in, he'd bribed a man with a five-munit piece. But naturally they'd taken all his money before he left Viron.

Still, there were other incentives. Especially for a criminal—and Duvron Chai's watchman, like every other person on Demerong, was a criminal. He knocked again.

"I thought I told you to go away!"

"Listen," Ronson said urgently. "Listen to me, huh?"

"Go ahead."

"Before I left Viron I slipped some sticks of ryonite into my belt. The guards didn't notice it when they shipped me down here."

The watchman's eyes went bright. Ryonite was the galaxy's most desirable drug.

"I've got eight sticks," Ronson said. "I want to tell

Duvron Chai about them. Maybe I can trade some of them in for a better place to stay."

A crafty gleam shone in the watchman's eyes. "He gave orders not to be disturbed. Why should I let you in just to make a fancy deal for yourself?"

Desperately Ronson said, "Okay, I'll give you two sticks yourself—only let me in! I can't stay in that filthy hole they gave me to live in."

"Make it three sticks."

"All right. Three. But open up."

Ronson heard the sound of a bolt sliding back and of locks clicking, and then the door edged open. The watchman appeared in the opening and said, "Hand over the sticks."

"Sure," Ronson said. In the darkness he yanked out the wedgebladed knife Duvron Chai had given him and plunged it deep into the Vironian's throat. The watchman uttered a bubbly sigh and started to fall forward in a great heap.

Ronson caught him, folded him up, and stowed him in the dark alley near the door. Then he stepped inside and quietly bolted the door. He found himself in total darkness — but somewhere up

ahead he spied the yellow gleam of a light.

He tucked the knife back in his belt and began to tiptoe forward.

The yellow gleam was coming from a door slightly ajar, deeper in the building. Ronson edged close and heard a voice talking. A low, resonant, harsh voice. The voice of Duvron Chai.

"Kilong? This is Duvron."

Kilong? Ronson wondered. *Why, that was the name of the Overlord's private secretary—!*

"The shipment arrived," Duvron Chai went on. "But it wasn't enough. I still want ten more ultraguns and some decent knives. And you can throw in a couple of dozen sticks of ryonite too."

"I'm sorry, Duvron," came the reply. "I can't keep getting this stuff for you. It's risky—damned risky. You know any shipments to Demerong are strictly illegal."

"Sure I know that. And I know it's illegal for you to be the Overlord's private secretary while your brother's a convict on Demerong!"

"*Duvron!* You wouldn't—"

"Wouldn't I, brother? You keep coming through with the goods or I'll make use of this subradio for something

else besides chatting with you. I'll get hold of the Overlord and tell him that his secretary is none other than the younger brother of Duvron Chai, the man who tried to assassinate him and take over Viron—"

"All right, Duvron. You win again. I'll send what you ask for."

"Thanks kindly, brother dear." Duvron Chai broke the contact—and at that moment Ronson shoved open the door and shouldered his way into the door.

The fat alien looked up in astonishment. "Thyon—what are you doing in here? How—"

Then he saw the knife flashing in Ronson's hand. He went for his ultragun and fired. A spurt of violet energy shot past Ronson's right shoulder, singed his ear, and splatted against the wall. Ronson leaped forward and grabbed the alien's wrist before he could fire again.

He twisted. The gun dropped and skittered away. Duvron Chai struggled to avert the knife, grabbing Ronson's descending arm. He was strong as a devil. Ronson drew up his knee and buried it in the fat covering Duvron Chai's stomach.

The alien grunted in pain,

but succeeded in forcing Ronson's hand down. "Drop it—drop it—"

Grimly Ronson clung to the knife, while agony shot upward from his wrist through his shoulder. He clamped his teeth together as the massive alien continued the pressure. He was being forced back, back, and any minute it seemed his arm would rip loose. The pain was beyond endurance.

But Earth hung in the balance. *Earth.*

Ronson suddenly bent double and slid out from the grip of the surprised alien. Duvron Chai turned, panting heavily, and rumbled ponderously toward the dancing Earthman.

Ronson slipped lithely between his outstretched arms and stabbed the knife deep into the alien's belly. He ripped upward savagely. A torrent of blood spouted.

Duvron Chai fell backward limply. "Never should have trusted you . . . looked too damned intelligent," he muttered. "Should have killed you."

"You should never have trusted anyone," Ronson said. "You maintained your reign by blackmailing your brother. What made you think you

could trust a stranger with a knife?"

The Earth agent stooped and deftly slit the alien's throat. There was no need to let Duvron Chai suffer. Ronson crossed the room, locked the door, and turned toward the subradio set.

Over this subradio set, Duvron Chai had extorted from his helpless brother the guns and knives and narcotics with which he'd won his empire on Demerong.

Ronson spun the dials until he picked up the secret Earth Intelligence channel.

"This is Earthly Info," a voice said. "Come in."

"Earthly Info, this is Ron-

son. You read me, boys?"

"Ronson! Where in blazes are you?"

"Skip that for now. Listen: Viron plans a sneak attack on Earth and her colonies at 0600 on the morning of September 7. Got that?"

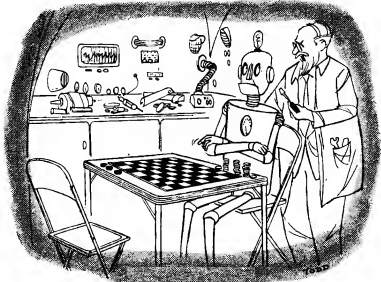
"Sneak attack, Viron, 0600 Sep 7. We'll be ready for them. Where are you now?"

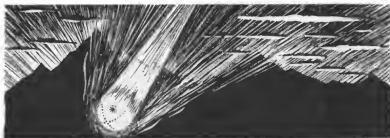
"Demerong."

"Demerong? The prison world? But how—"

"Never you mind that," Ronson said. "Just get me off here in a hurry. In about a week there's going to be a war going on, friend. I want to be out there, helping Earth fight it."

THE END





The Unluckiest Man In The World

By JACK MILTON

Only a man completely deserted by the gods could do what Bert did. He picked the longest shot conceivable, bet against himself—and won!

THE meeting of the East Side Chess and Chowder Club was coming to a close. We'd finished our games, and had repaired to the bar for a final round, when a newsboy came in with the latest papers. Phil Sykes hailed him, paid him double for a tabloid, and glanced idly over the headlines.

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed. "It finally happened."

"What finally happened?" asked Orville, around a pretzel.

"Listen to this. *Satellite falls in Montana mountains, killing man. Failure of safe-return device inexplicable, authorities say.*"

"Fantastic!" Rog said. "I thought they had that return device perfected so the thing would explode in the stratosphere if it weren't working."

"Always knew it would happen," said Gus. "Just isn't safe anymore."

"Think of the guy it hit, though," said Orville around a mouthful of beer. "Anybody who'd have an accident like that must be the unluckiest man alive."

Phil Sykes had put down the paper and was listening to the conversation with a funny look in his eyes. "I know something about this," he said. "In the first place, the man who was hit was not the

unluckiest man alive. In the second place, it wasn't an accident—it was cold-blooded murder." He absent-mindedly tapped his empty beer glass on the bar. "I might tell you about it, I suppose, if you'd care to hear."

We cared to hear, and I signalled the bartender to fill up Phil's glass. This story promised to be worth it.

Even Gus the cynic was ready to listen, though he put up a rearguard action. "How," he asked, "are you so sure about all this? You have not read more than the headline—you don't know the name of the man who was killed or how it happened."

"I don't have to read the paper to know that," Phil answered irritably. "Now shut up and listen. . . ."

Bertram Cramwell is the unluckiest man in the world [Phil began]. Bert and I were in college together, and since I was the only guy in college that understood him, he kept coming around to see me afterwards. Not that I was in his league—he was loaded. His father had been a big railroad man, and left him with thousand dollar bills coming out of his ears.

I said he *was* loaded, and that's part of the story. He's not so loaded now, and the

way things are going, he may soon be poor enough to stop being so unlucky. . . .

The thing is, Bert is a gambler. He'll bet on anything at all, and if he can't bet, he dies a little. He doesn't really care about winning or losing—like a kleptomaniac doesn't really need the stuff he steals, he just has to steal. And Bert used to be lucky, which was why he wasn't liked in college. It's hard to like a guy who cons you into betting with him on sure things, and then wins from you. Every time. I got on with him because I don't bet—ever.

Anyhow, after college, Bert kicked around here and there having a real relaxed time of it. Every now and then on his way from Paris to Honolulu, or from Mexico City to Montreal, he'd stop by and say hello, and tell me about some of the screwy bets he'd dreamed up.

And then one time he stopped by on his way back from Haiti to someplace, and he told me about a trip he'd made back in the jungle. He said he'd even managed to scare up a couple of bets with natives who couldn't speak English. One of them had sort of back-fired, though, he wasn't sure how. He'd won the bet all right — something about

whether a blue bird or a red bird would fly across the river first. But the native didn't want to pay up. Or rather, he did pay up, gave Bert an amulet from around his neck, but he was pretty unhappy about it, and tried to get Bert to take something else.

Bert wouldn't, and the interpreter told him he should, and Bert got stubborn about it, and the next thing was that another native—an old one, with different, mad eyes—said something to him, something that the interpreter wouldn't interpret.

Not until later. Then he said that the old man had cursed Bert, had sworn that for his evil, Bert would never win another bet—and if he did win a bet, he would die instantly . . . which is a good way of losing a bet, it seemed to me, as I told Bert when I heard all this.

Bert laughed at me. "That death bit is a kick," he snorted. "They throw that stuff into their curses to make them sound bigger. Anyhow, the interpreter got fouled up, gave me two or three different translations. I'd die when I won a bet, I'd die when I couldn't win by dying, I'd die when the moon came over the mountain. . . . Phooey! Care to make a small wager that

the Rangers will win the Stanley Cup?"

"No thanks," I said. "How's your luck been lately?"

"Not so good, as a matter of fact," Bert said off-handedly. "Just a phase, though. Just a phase."

But it wasn't just a phase. Bert had really lost his touch. Not only did he lose his little bets, he began to lose his big ones. His stock market holdings began to fall and to fold, the businesses that he had pieces of began to go to hell, and inside of six months, Bert was no longer a very rich guy.

The next time I saw him, he was looking thin, worried, and careful. When he crossed the street, he'd look each way twice, and then once more, before he stepped off the curb. If an airplane went by overhead, he'd step into a doorway and watch it till it had gotten safely past him. You see, Bert looked at everything as a gamble, including his living, and he was taking no chances now that he could help.

He couldn't help all of them though — he couldn't help making an occasional bet any more than a drug addict can help taking that next pop. And he lost them all. Which was why he didn't want to talk to Dirty Donovan when

Dirty tracked him down in my apartment.

Dirty had been a bookie, and he'd handled a lot of Bert's bets in the past. He got to the point where he would not bet with Bert, though, because Bert always won. Dirty finally figured Bert had an in with the devil, and there was no point bucking him. Now he wanted Bert on his side, because he had a deal going that needed some real luck to put through, and Bert, Dirty thought, had more luck than anybody in the world.

I don't know what the deal was, exactly — something about investing in some kind of shipping operation that would pay off 500 to 1, if a certain South American general did as well as he hoped to in a forthcoming blood-letting.

In any case, Bert would have none of it.

"Look, Dirty, my luck has changed. I lost it—all of it. I haven't won one bet in that last hundred and fifty. And some of them have been cinches. . . ." He stopped and looked deep into the coffee cup in front of him. "I wonder . . . I wonder if that mad old man in the jungle really had something. What did he say—I'd lose every bet, and if I won one, I'd die?"

Bert sat up and snapped his fingers. "I got an idea, Dirty. You say there's three million dollars in this deal. Okay, you help me bust this jinx, and I'll go in with you on this one scrimy operation." Bert was basically a good guy, if I haven't said so before, and wouldn't ordinarily look to make money out of the killing of a lot of innocent civilians.

His idea was screwy—and it's the point of this story, and the explanation of the newspaper headline I just read you. He told Dirty that he *knew* this whole thing was psychological, and what he needed to do was win just one bet for the jinx to bust wide open—and he wasn't worried about dropping dead, either. So all they had to do was make a bet—a ridiculous bet that Bert couldn't help winning. Say like betting five bucks that Dirty wouldn't be hit by a satellite within the next thirty days.

"Wait a minute," I said, "you can't do that, Bert." Because I *believed* in that curse. I believed in it when Bert had first told me about it. I had an old aunt, once, who—but that's another story. Anyhow, believe me, I had reason to believe in the curse, and in the danger of the bet Bert

wanted to make. Dirty Donovan was a cheap chiseller, but that didn't mean that Bert had the right to kill him this way.

Bert didn't care, Dirty didn't believe me, and they made the bet: five dollars, stakes to be held by me and paid out in thirty days to Bert if Dirty had not been hit by a satellite. With the understanding that if Bert won—and broke his unlucky streak—he'd go in the deal with Dirty. If—I told him—he was still alive.

That thirty days was up at ten o'clock this morning. And I guarantee you that this newspaper story tells of the death of Dirty Donovan. . . . And I call it murder—murder by the unluckiest man in the world.

Gus shook his head. "I don't believe it."

Orville swallowed the last of his beer. "Wonderful, Phil, you tell better stories every week. And the funny thing is, I believe every word of it."

"I do, too," said Rog, reaching for the newspaper. "Now let's see Dirty Donovan's obit"

He spread out the paper, found his place, and began reading aloud:

"Missoula, Montana, De-

cember Fourteenth. One of our satellites fell to earth in the nearby Mission Mountains shortly after eight o'clock this morning, striking and killing instantly a hunter separated from his party. The satellite is believed to be one of those equipped with a device to return it safely to earth for examination of the various recording apparatuses it carries. "Safely to earth," authorities say, means safely back to a designated landing area, and there is yet no explanation available of how a satellite that should have landed in the New Mexican desert could have crashed on a Montana mountain.

"The hunter who was killed had recently left his party further back in the mountains to make a special trip to town to conduct some business he had forgotten to take care of. Ironically, it has been learned that the business which brought the hunter, Mr. Bertram Cramwell. . . ."

"Bertram Cramwell!" Phil yelled. "Let me see that!" He grabbed the paper from Rog. "Well I'll be damned!"

"Something funny about that," Orville mumbled, his mouth full of peanuts. "It says he was killed shortly after eight—that means he hadn't won his bet yet."

"Yes, he had," Phil said slowly. "Montana is on Rocky Mountain Time, two hours later than here. So he *had* won the bet. What I don't understand is *why* he won the bet. Why did he win this one particular bet, and lose every single other bet he'd made since Haiti, both big and small?"

"All right, all right," Gus said irritably. "Let's hear the rest of that report, and then talk about it."

Rog took back the paper from Phil's nerveless hands, and took up reading again.

"Ironically, it has been learned that the business which brought the hunter, Mr. Bertram Cramwell, to the exact spot where the satellite fell, was the necessity of renewing his life insurance policies, totalling over \$100,000. Members of the hunting party say that Mr. Cramwell had turned 'white as a sheet' when he discovered an unmailed letter to his insurance company in his pack, and had left his party immediately to return to town and wire in his premiums. His policies, it is reported, expired at midnight last night. . . ."

Phil sighed. "Well, that explains it, and it explains why he wasn't worried about dying

when he made that bet with Dirty Donovan."

"It's simple enough," Phil said. "With those insurance policies, Bert had a hundred thousand dollar bet going that he would die. The curse couldn't kill him while the insurance was in effect, because then the curse would be letting him win his bet. . . ."

"Wait a minute," Gus said. "I got you now. But how come he won that five dollar bet with Dirty Donovan?"

"I don't know for sure, but I've got an idea. Bert told me that after the interpreter had explained the situation to him, back there in the jungle, he'd given the interpreter five bucks to give to the man he'd won the bet from. He didn't give it to the man himself, because that would look as though he believed in the curse, and he only did it because he felt sorry for the man losing something he seemed to prize so much. Bert figured the interpreter had probably kept the money for himself—I think now he didn't. And that somebody figured this bet squared it."

Phil shoved his glass forward. "I also think I'm going to get drunk. Anybody with me?"

We were all with him.

THE END



"The Space Club is bringing me a visitor today in person. We have been corresponding for six or seven months . . . I doubt if it's a first in Space Club history, but I'm grateful for having it happen to me." Thus writes Marijane Johnson, 1011 E. Hoffman, Spokane 22, Washington. For those others who might want to correspond with Marijane, she is 37 years old. Arthritis confines her to a wheelchair. The Space Club has contributed interesting and happy experiences to her life as it will to yours. Join and see for yourself.

HAZEL BATES, 840 42nd ST., OAKLAND 8, CALIF. . . . Hazel thinks that The Space Club is a great idea. She is 18 years old and has been a science-fiction fan for the past nine years. Besides this she is interested in sports, records and drawing.

JOE BOGNER, 3501 W. 61 PL., CHICAGO, ILL. . . . 5'8" tall, Joe has blond hair and blue eyes. His interests include s-f, fantasy and music.

KAREN CAPTAIN, 24 FAIRMONT AVE., DUQUESNE, PA. . . . Karen is looking for some more ardent science-fiction readers. In her spare time she likes to ride horseback and read about atomic power. E.S.P. is another one of her interests. 5'4" tall, she weighs 106 pounds, has brown hair and green eyes.

CPL. CHARLES CONNELL, 1548226/6621, USMC, MASS 2 MWHG FMAW C/O FPO, SAN FRANCISCO, CALIF. . . . Charles

is 19 years old and stationed with the Marines in Japan. He serves as an electronics technician. His hobbies include electronics, model planes, astronomy and rockets.

MRS. LAUREL CONNELL, APT. 21C, MARINE VIEW TERRACE, EUREKA, CALIF. . . . Laurel is 18 years old and the mother of two daughters. When she has time she likes to write, read and delve into astronomy. She also collects recipes.

MR. A. V. EAST, 26 BERKELEY AVE., GREENFORD, MIDDLESEX, ENGLAND. . . . "I am surprised to see so many states represented in The Space Club but note there are no U. K. addresses. Perhaps I can remedy that. I am 28 years old and work for the British European Airways as a telephone sales clerk. Hobbies are travel, mainly European though I have lived in Canada and visited the U. S., photography."

DAVID HARTRANFT, 3326 EARL ST., LAURELDALE, PA. . . . David is partial to The Space Club because it enables s-f fans to exchange ideas. He is 6'1" tall, weighs 164 pounds, has dark brown hair and brown eyes. He's particularly interested in E.S.P. as well as all other branches of S-F.

DAVID D. HOLTZ, RA 17478312, SHAPE (8651), AIR/SP. OPNS. DIV., APO 55, NEW YORK, N. Y. . . . 21 years old, David is 6' tall, weighs 160 pounds, has light brown hair and blue-gray eyes. Hobbies and interests include: s-f, sports, science, music. Favorite s-f stories are fast action, E.S.P. and those based on events that could happen. Would like to suggest the use of air mail to expedite the slow delivery of regular mail to Paris from the States.

ARLENE HOROWITZ, 8746 23rd AVENUE, BROOKLYN 14, NEW YORK. . . . 17-year-old Arlene has been interested in s-f for eight years. Her nickname is "Shorty." She enjoys watching wrestling matches. Favorite sport is bicycle riding. Wants to hear from fans her own age.

VINCENT IACALMI, 19 COTTAGE ST., LEOMINSTER, MASS. . . . Vincent is 13 years old. His hobbies are stamp collecting, s-f, photography and record collecting.

PATTY JACKSON, 915 N. 2½ ST., MC ALLEN, TEXAS. . . . 14-year-old Patty would like to hear from pen pals of all ages who are interested in sports, rock'n-roll, and science fiction. She has recently enjoyed looking at the Mrkos comet.

TAL JOHNS, 13538 VALLEY-HEART, SHERMAN OAKS, CALIF. . . . Tal is currently getting a start in the advertising business as combination mail boy and TV writer. He is 23 years old, 6'1" tall, weighs 182, has blue eyes. He plays tennis quite a bit. Hobbies: stamp collecting, racing pigeons, British Navy during World War I, Arctic Explorers of the Nine-

teenth Century. Looking forward to corresponding with other s-f fans.

BRUCE MALCH, 315-D CHERRY ROAD, OCEANSIDE, CALIF. . . . Bruce is 27 years old, single and among the minority, so he says, who believe that the UFO's are of extraterrestrial origin. He'd like to hear from others who share this feeling.

RONALD MURPHY, 4592 ELM COURT, DENVER 21, COLO. . . . Ronald says that those previously listed in The Space Club look like a nice bunch of people and he wants to be in contact with them. He has been reading science fiction for nearly three years. He is 15 years old.

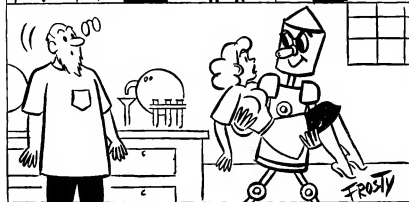
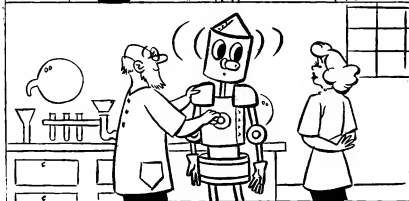
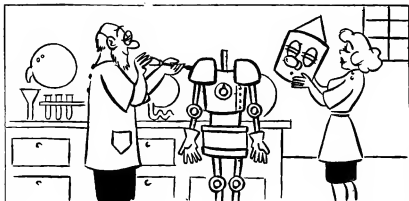
SP 2 ROBERT G. NEAL, RA 19 460 641, US ARMY MP DET INCHON (8224) APO 971 SAN FRANCISCO, CALIF. . . . Robert wants to compare notes and opinions with s-f enthusiasts who like all kinds of science fiction.

ARLINE M. PENDEXTER, 53 FLORIDA AVE., PORTLAND, MAINE. . . . 29 years old, Arline is 5'6" tall, weighs 105 pounds, has brown hair and blue eyes. She reads everything that is remotely connected with s-f. Her other interests include: sewing, knitting, crocheting and dancing.

ELY SILK, 203 WEST 81st ST., NEW YORK, N. Y. . . . Ely is interested in astronomy, bio-physics, nuclear physics, science fiction, writing, and U.F.O.'s. Age: 15.

DAVID WASSON, 1501 4th AVE., N.W., GREAT FALLS, MONTANA. . . . At 15 David's interests are cartooning, photography, metaphysics, astronomy and flying saucers. He is anxious to exchange views about same with members of The Space Club.

BOB WHEELER, 10601 E. 28th ST., INDEPENDENCE, MO. . . . Bob belongs to the Science Fiction Book Club and to a U.F.O. Study Club in Kansas City. He is 15 years old.





by S. E. COTTS

THE SECRET VISITORS. *By James White. 155 pp. Ace Book. Paper: 35¢.*

This is a story that has a lot of good elements; yet through some mysterious transformation the end product is just plain dull. There is a longevity serum, an enemy organization that plants agents here through the cover-up of a tourist bureau, a trip through the galaxy on ships that are half human and half machine and telepathic besides, and a love story between an Earthman and a girl from the planet, Harla.

Yet none of these inducements make the reader care very much what happens to the characters because he cannot escape the overwhelming impression that the author isn't really very interested in what happens either.

Just for the record though, the plot concerns the efforts of the World Security Organization to stop another world war. This group, under a man named Hedley and aided by a Dr. Lockhart, uncovers some of the spies that have infiltrated Earth. But matters are complicated when they discover that the spies are not foreigners but alien beings.

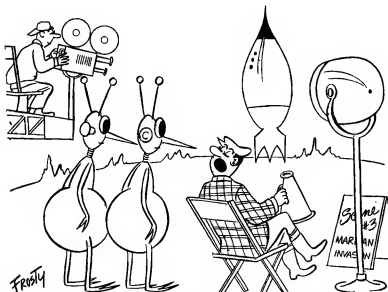
What started out to be a good cosmic counterspy story ends up as a poor space serial, and all the reader can do is to sit back in helpless and unanticipated annoyance.

THE THIRD LEVEL. *By Jack Finney. 256 pp. Rinehart and Company, Inc. \$3.00.*

It is a credit to Mr. Finney's imagination that though each of these stories deals with the fourth dimension, they bear no similarity to each other. This collection (all of which have appeared previously in magazines) runs the gamut from the poignant longing

in "Of Missing Persons" to the tickling humor of "Uncle Len's Wonderful Adjective Cellar." Nevertheless, Mr. Finney's distinctive style stamps each one as unmistakably his own in spite of the variety of mood and subject matter.

This reviewer's main criticism concerns the arrangement of the stories in the present volume. Unfortunately the last story in the book is in many ways the weakest. It is potentially as fine as the rest, but too long for the slender content. Where all the rest of the stories have shown great economy of means, this one becomes endlessly descriptive, and the amount of suspense generated is not sufficient to make one read 26 pages of story with zest. Had this story occurred in the middle of the book, its failings might have gone unnoticed, but coming at the end, after eleven stories of superior quality, it cannot help but be a letdown. Barring this, however, these stories cannot be too highly recommended. Mr. Finney's haunting style is very much his own and its power is shown by the way the reader's mind goes on exploring the possibilities of each "time quirk" long after the conclusion of the story.



"Those costumes are all wrong. The producer says
Martians look just like we do."



BY THE READERS

Dear Editor:

I noticed that 5 of the 13 letters to the editor in the November *Amazing* were from members of National Fantasy Fan Federation. As I'm a member I'm all for supporting the fact that fandom does help an editor to know what is wanted and not wanted.

Marijane Johnson
1011 E. Hoffman
Spokane 22, Washington

● *I didn't know NFFF was such a large organization. More power to them.*

Dear Ed:

I absolutely see no reason what-so-ever for you to have run that terrible issue on Flying Saucers. Sure, some people must have liked it, but as for me, uh-uh. Even the fiction was terrible. It's too bad such a nice cover had to be wasted on such a bad issue.

Don Kent
3800 Willington
Chicago 18, Ill.

● *Amazing is back to normal now, Kent. Great, isn't it?*

Dear Editor:

I have read with interest the Shaver article in the October issue of *Amazing Stories*. In it Mr. Shaver makes a statement which can be shown to be incorrect. I quote, "How could I have described Kenneth Arnold's saucers in advance, unless I knew? Especially the saucer appearance, which appears nowhere in older records?"

Being familiar with ancient legends as Mr. Shaver is, he knows as well as I, that there are numerous reports of disk-shaped craft therein. Need I give references? Reports of flying disks were reported by some monks in an English monastery in the year 1100 approximately.

From the tone of his article it would seem that he is trying to impress the readers with his "profound technological knowledge" of flying saucers. He could impress them much more by producing a *workable model*. In the preface to the article Mr. Shaver states that, "Knowledge is in doing, not accepting." Why not try it?

Geza Korchmaros, Jr.
2528 Market St.
Youngstown 7, Ohio

● *Why don't you write Mr. Shaver and suggest he construct a model. Perhaps he hasn't thought of it.*

Dear Editor:

I write this in response to the various articles on Flying Saucers in the October issue of *Amazing*.

I have never seen anything on the ground or in the air that I have as much as suspected to be a flying saucer or spaceship from other than our Earth. I consider myself well read on the subject and have a library of books, magazines and articles that take up quite a bit of room. I have close friends who have had exciting experiences relative to UFO's and, with some exceptions, I am certain that the stories I have heard were neither hoaxes nor hallucinations.

I should think, from the articles which were published and your statement that you do not intend to publish much more on the subject of flying saucers, that you were suddenly caught with a shortage of good fiction. Your statement that "after you have passed judgment on each of the articles in the special supplement, you'll have a broad foundation for your own decision" is utterly ridiculous. There is too much to the field to assume that readers could form a decisive opinion on the basis of the material in that one special issue.

If my first reason for your having included the saucers yarns is not correct, then the real reason almost has to be that you feel the fiction stories will sell better with the saucer material added.

I am open-minded about the whole thing, but after reading hundreds of stories told by reputable persons, plus knowing several persons who have seen for themselves, I certainly lean toward believing that we have had and are still having visitors from somewhere in outer space.

Among my books, magazines and newspaper clippings, I have many contradictory articles published or authorized to be published by the Air Force. In several cases the information coming from the

Air Force was a photo of the actual letter written by an authorized Air Force officer. In more than one case the Air Force has gone so far as to say that even though most sightings were found to be hoaxes, they have no doubt as to the UFO's being present in our skies, that they would have to be maneuvered by intelligent beings and that they could not be from our Earth. I have one article released from the Air Force that specifically states that they have some excellent photos and movies of flying saucers. These may all be untrue and the article which you have printed may be the truth. Who knows?

If you have any desire to publish something that might help the public to come to some decision concerning this controversy, why don't you come up with something that has substance? Otherwise, how about sticking to your fiction stories?

Fred H. Ellis
5511 Starling St.
Houston 17, Texas

Dear Editor:

I have just had the pleasure of reading your issue concerning UFO's. It was indeed very interesting, and to me quite informative. The part that particularly caught my fancy, was the section written by Richard S. Shaver.

In that part, and also in the front of the magazine, was made mention of the article called Shaver's Mystery. If anyone would like to part with this and Mr. Shaver's articles on flying saucers, I would like very much to get a hold of them.

Jack Harter
c/o WRVA Radio
Richmond, Va.

● *Letters addressed to Richard Shaver at Amherst, Wisconsin, will reach him.*

Dear Editor:

This should be but one of a raft of letters thanking you for the issue dealing with the pros and cons of UFO's.

I was under the apparently mistaken apprehension that the reading of s-f was doing wonders for its followers by generating a scientific approach to thinking of things such as these. But there is as much "noise," in the electronic sense, in this matter as in any I have ever heard of. What happens to a scientist who tries to prove his point by trying to shout his critics? It reminds me of the clergyman's sermon note reading, "Holler loud here; your argument is weak."

I thought it was common knowledge that you could prove the existence of anything by eyewitness reports. You name it and I'll find dozens of people who have seen it—with trimmings. The whole thing is shot through with so many childish inconsistencies that it is making many of us slightly sick at the stomach.

For heaven's sake, aren't we adult enough to admit that this is merely another one of the odd things in the world which we can't explain? Why must we invent explanations when we see there isn't enough to go on? Or why not, then, use the explanations ready-made for us by the ancients, and dismiss the whole thing as a manifestation of the gods?

I have a still better suggestion; let's award it the Scotch verdict of "Not proven," class it together with the experiments of Dr. Rhine, and wait and see. In the meantime, these "explanations," cut out of moonshine, are funny.

Floyd W. Zwicky
913 Fourth Ave.
Rockford, Ill.

Dear Editor:

"Children of Chaos" in my opinion, was one of your best. Try to get this author to us more often. We are the public. We read top quality stuff, then we have to decide the best of it.

I don't want to think that science fiction fans are simple-minded fools.

James W. Ayers
609 First Street
Attalla, Alabama

● *We've got some stories coming up that are even better than "Children . . ." Watch for them.*

Dear Ed:

Have just finished reading the November issue of *Amazing Stories*. I wish to say that all the stories were excellent. Having read your magazine quite a while I believe that this issue was the best in a long time. The cover was very good also. Keep up the good stories. I also like the quizzes.

Carl James Noyes
1632 S. Jefferson
Saginaw, Michigan

Dear Editor:

I cannot thank you adequately enough for October *Amazing Stories*. Imagine, under one cover, having such notable UFO re-

searchers as Ray Palmer, Ken Arnold, Gray Barker, and Shaver himself. Yes, Richard S. Shaver, I never thought that day would come in (of all magazines) *Amazing Stories*. Miracle of miracles!

A memorable issue, and one which will inevitably have your circulation soaring like crazy.

Alex Saunders
17 Mackay Ave.
Toronto 10, Ontario

● *I'm going to hold you to that statement about circulation soaring like crazy, Alex.*

Dear Editor:

Just purchased your October issue of *Amazing*. From page 6 to 66 it is up to your usual high standard, but from there on it is terrible. The saucer articles were not "amazing" or even interesting.

I feel that we, your regular readers, should have a refund and since cash would require too much bookkeeping why not make the next issue 63 pages longer which is the amount of pages you wasted this time. Let's put the fiction back in science fiction.

James R. Gilliland
611 N.E.
Stockton, California

● *Fiction is back in science-fiction. Read this issue and see if you don't agree.*

Dear Editor:

What happened to *Amazing*? With all the saucer magazines on the stands, why ruin my favorite magazine by filling it with saucer material? What happened to the "Space Club"?

I wonder what the other readers thought of the October issue. I usually have a comment for any magazine but not this particular number. It was very nice for a saucer book, but it wasn't *Amazing*.

Marv Pfeifer
Paw Paw, Illinois

● *The special saucer issue has come and gone. Amazing is now back to its tried and tested format.*

Dear Editor:

Your magazine is one of the best, but may I use your space to lecture a bit? My point is that there are no adult science fiction programs on television. Oh, sure, we have some space operas, but from the way they toss about the laws of physics we can see that they

are meant for pre-schoolers. There are also some science fiction shows which show approaching advances in science. But, I ask you, how many times have Murray Leinster's or A. Boucher's, or Isaac Asimov's stories been done on television (or radio for that matter). How many adult TV stories have been set on other planets or in the far future? Think about that.

George Wagner
39 Wilbers Lane
Fort Thomas, Kentucky

● *I'm thinking.*

Dear Editor:

In reading your issue of *Amazing* for October, I wish to say that I liked the issue very much except for one thing. I noticed that one of your writers, a Mr. Ellis Hart, inclusively used foul and abusive language in his story "Farewell to Glory."

It seems to me as though some other words could have been substituted in their place. I believe that these terms were not necessary to telling the story.

I particularly liked, however, the fact that the majority of your writers have shown imagination and descriptiveness in all of their stories.

The manner in which Gordon Javlyn described the innermost thoughts of his characters is worthy of commendation.

Russell D. Williams
R.R. 1
Boggestown, Indiana

● *The language used in our fiction is watched very closely indeed. The foul and abusive is actually rather hard to define in all cases, is important to the story has some merit. Language, strong or otherwise, that does not further plot or characterization is, of course, varied personal opinion being what it is. Strong language, when it pointless.*

Dear Editor:

I am in sort of a bad spot. You see I have been reading your magazines for the second year now. I find that *Amazing* and *Fantastic* are probably the two best magazines ever to hit my town and I can hardly get a hold of them. The circulation is so small that we only get one or two magazines to go around to the one thousand populace. I always try to be good neighborly and pass what I have around the neighborhood, but I can't get them back to read over. I was wondering if any of your readers could send me some of the s-f

magazines lying around their homes. I certainly would appreciate them.

George Dunkel
Box 545
Bayfield, Wisconsin

• *You'll probably be flooded with Amazings and Fantastic's, George. Read them and pass them along.*

Test Your I. Q.

ANSWERS

1. 1931. Professor Piccard, Swiss physicist, and Charles Knifer, ascended in a balloon from Augsburg, Germany, and reached a height of 51,793 feet in a 17 hour flight that terminated on a glacier near Innsbruck, Austria. 2. 1901. Guglielmo Marconi, receiving through an aerial held high aloft by a kite, in Poldho, Newfoundland, heard the letter "S" as it was being sent from Cornwall, England. 3. 1793. The first balloon voyage in this country was made by Pierre Blanchard, a French pilot, who, in George Washington's presence, went aloft in Philadelphia, and (some 45 minutes later) landed in Woodbury, New Jersey. 4. 1858. The first two Atlantic cable messages were from Queen Victoria to President James Buchanan and his reply. 5. 1845. Dr. Crawford Long, pioneer in use of ether anesthesia, used it at the delivery of his second child, at Jefferson, Georgia. 6. 1928. W2XBS, in New York City. 7. 1920. The first broadcast was made by KDKA, Pittsburgh, the first commercially licensed radio station. 8. 1876. The first two-way telephone conversation was conducted by engineers and scientists of the Bell Laboratories, between Boston and Cambridgeport, Mass., a distance of two miles. 9. 1844. Over the first electric telegraph line in the world, between Baltimore and Washington, Ann Ellsworth sent these most fittings words, which was the first telegraph message: "What hath God wrought!" 10. 1915. Spanning a distance of 3600 miles, direct telephone communication between New York City and San Francisco was opened for the first time.

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